2 Mainstreaming behavioural public policy

This document provides practical guidance for government policy makers on how to achieve a systemic integration of behavioural science insights and methods into the policy making process. After a decade of advocacy and achievements, behavioural public policy looks set to endure. The time is right to gather lessons learned from across the global community of behavioural science experts in government and orient efforts for upcoming years.

Despite the tremendous growth in behavioural public policy, many opportunities remain for governments to embed behavioural science more deeply and broadly in their policy making (Lecouturier et al., 2024[1]). Discussions among members of the OECD's Network of Behavioural Insights Experts in Government indicate that many teams have dramatically matured their practices in recent years. But many still struggle to make an impact with their work and to get their ideas implemented in practice. Through the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, while some believed the applicability or robustness of behavioural science evidence was overstated (Feitsma and Whitehead, 2021[2]), others found it difficult to integrate a behavioural lens into their government's response (OECD, 2020[3]). And some dedicated teams of behavioural science experts still report "precarious funding and insecure status" (Lecouturier et al., 2024[1]).

Behavioural public policy could be considered 'mainstreamed' if behavioural science evidence appropriately and meaningfully informed most public policies for which it is relevant. Behavioural science would be an intrinsic part of the government's identity and practice, with policy makers equipped to assess when it would be relevant and appropriate to draw on behavioural science evidence (Kumpf and Jhunjhunwala, 2023[4]; West and Gould, 2022[5]). Behavioural science would be "integrated into an organisation's core activities rather than acting as an optional specialist tool" (Hallsworth, 2023[6]), enabling a "transition to a kind of policy making in which the behavioural sciences perspective is taken just as seriously as the economic and legal perspectives" (Jonkers and Tiemeijer, 2015[7]). The United Nations, for example, aims to integrate behavioural science "seamlessly into the fabric of our work" (United Nations, 2023[8]).

Achieving this integration is difficult and highly dependent on contextual and organisational factors (Ewert, 2019[9]; Jakobsen et al., 2019[10]), but it is likely to require a multi-level approach (Curtis, Fulton and Brown, 2018[11]). Governments have approached this "system-level enablement" (West and Gould, 2022[5]) in a wide variety of ways, with varying success. Examples of governments' approaches have been collated in a recent book (Sanders, Bhanot and O'Flaherty, 2023[12]) as well as by:

- the United Kingdom's Economic and Social Research Council (Whitehead et al., 2014[13])
- the European Commission (Lourenco et al., 2016[14])
- the OECD (OECD, 2017[15])
- the World Bank (Afif et al., 2018[16]).

Some synthesis has been attempted:

- in a private sector context (Feng, Kim and Soman, 2021[17]; Khan and Newman, 2021[18])

- at the United Nations (United Nations, 2021[19])
- for discrete behavioural science teams in government by the World Health Organization (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2022[20]) and ideas42 (Barrows et al., 2018[21]).

There remains little practical guidance, however, for government policy makers on how to embed behavioural science in policy systems and processes.

Analytical framework for behavioural science in evidence-informed policy

Behavioural public policy strives for an evidence-informed approach to public policy; it consists of approaching policy problems from the perspective of human behaviour, and having analysed a problem in this way, seeking and applying relevant behavioural science evidence. Behavioural public policy can therefore contribute to governments' broader efforts towards evidence-informed policy making (OECD, 2020[22]) and "evidential reasoning" (Rantala, Alasuutari and Kuorikoski, 2023[23]).

The OECD has published comprehensive guidance on how governments can build their capacity for evidence-informed policy making (OECD, 2020[22]). This guidance models evidence use as a market, requiring both a consistent supply of high-quality, policy-relevant research evidence (such as scientific investigations and policy evaluations) as well as demand from policy makers (Newman, Fisher and Shaxson, 2012[24]). A multi-level approach is essential to building demand for evidence (Stewart, Langer and Erasmus, 2018[25]), including individual policy makers' evidence-use skills, organisations' technical capacity and culture, and the institutions, connections, and attitudes that shape the wider environment outside the organisation.

This report identifies good practice principles that can help create a well-functioning evidence use market in the context of behavioural science and a people-centred approach to policy making.

Overcoming barriers to behavioural public policy

Behavioural steps in the use of evidence in policy making include the need for policy makers to know, understand, and value evidence, translate the available evidence into their own context, and then implement that evidence at scale (Linos, 2023[26]). Each of these steps calls on policy makers to make complex judgements in constrained operating environments and may require them to conduct or commission new research and testing. These evidence-use behaviours are made more difficult by common features of policy systems, such as a preference for the status quo or previous practices, a turbulent operating environment in which new priorities constantly emerge, avoidance of risky decisions, caution towards unfamiliar partners, decision-making authority resting with senior leaders, and a need for rapid decision-making and scarcity of time to plan deep reforms (West and Gould, 2022[5]; Curtis, Fulton and Brown, 2018[11]).

Models from behavioural science suggest what might encourage policy makers to adopt these evidence-use behaviours. The COM-B model (Michie, van Stralen and West, 2011[27]) is a generic, accessible model that has been used previously in this context (OECD, 2020[22]; WHO, 2023[28]; Moffat, Cook and Chater, 2022[29]; Langer, Tripney and Gough, 2016[30]). The model suggests that people are likely to engage in a behaviour (B) if they have the capability (C), opportunity (O), and motivation (M) to do so. This report's good practice principles are approximately mapped to these COM-B categories in the figure below.

Figure 2.1. LOGIC principles approximately mapped to the COM-B model

Good practice principles can help increase the motivation, opportunity, and capability of organisations in applying behavioural public policy

Source: Adapted from (Michie, van Stralen and West, 2011[27])

Maturing practices and governance models over time

Embedding behavioural science into a government's policy making practice is a complex, multi-year task. While all of this report's principles are relevant throughout that journey, the specific practices that will be most effective are likely to change as new challenges, opportunities, and risks emerge.

It is impossible to present a universal maturity journey for how governments should mainstream their use of behavioural science. Governments and organisations differ according to:

- **Starting points**. Some organisations already have robust systems for engaging with users or assessing policy proposals; others are new to a people-centred, evidence-informed approach. Countries differ in the depth of behavioural science expertise readily available inside and outside government.
- **Policy systems**. The norms, structures, relationships, and processes that shape policy making differ across governments and organisations. The path dependency of policy systems means that previous experiences and habits may either facilitate or hinder the adoption of a behavioural lens (Kaur et al., 2022[31]). These institutional and systemic factors will determine what path it is reasonable and effective to take to encourage greater use of behavioural science evidence.
- **End goals**. Differences in policy topic, priorities, capacity, and ambition mean that different governments or organisations may adopt different definitions of what it means to mainstream behavioural public policy in their context.

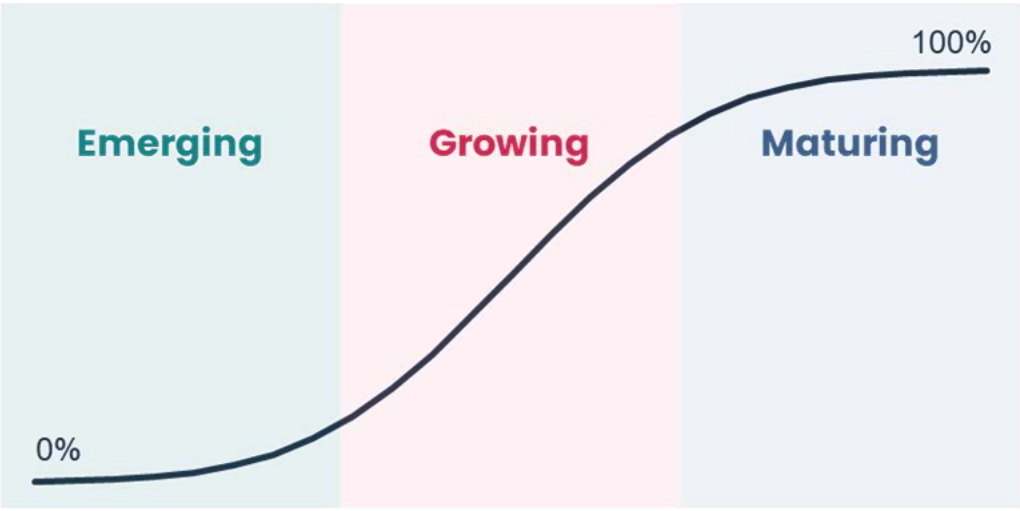
Although paths and experiences will differ, most governments are likely to proceed through an emerging phase, a growing phase, and a maturing phase. Innovation diffusion theory offers a simple way of thinking about how a new behaviour can spread through a population (Meade and Islam, 2006[32]). Visualised using

a normal curve, the theory proposes initial adoption by a small number of people, then a period of relatively rapid diffusion across most of the population, followed by eventual adoption by the remaining laggards.

The mainstreaming of behavioural science can be considered the same way (Severijnen, Slob and Groot, 2022[33]). When a government first turns explicitly to behavioural science, it is likely that this evidence is produced and attended to only in isolated cases (see Table 7.1). Over time the government may see multiple uses of behavioural science across its policy topics and operations. Finally, a behavioural lens may become core to the way policy making is done (Kumpf and Jhunjhunwala, 2023[4]).

Figure 2.2. Phases in the journey of mainstreaming behavioural public policy

Over time more policy makers or policy decisions consider behavioural science evidence



Source: Inspired by innovation diffusion theory (Meade and Islam, 2006[32])

From survey data and other engagements with the behavioural public policy community, the OECD sees different considerations and risks emerging across the mainstreaming journey:

Emerging. Early in the journey, advocates for behavioural public policy need to convince policy makers, managers, and senior leaders that adopting a behavioural perspective could help them deliver better outcomes. Initial activities are likely to be difficult and face numerous barriers, such as low stakeholder buy-in and difficulties accessing data. Initial funding envelopes for specified periods can be useful, but might discourage work that needs to unfold over longer time horizons. Quick results can build support for the behavioural approach, but will probably only be achievable on relatively less significant policy questions (such as optimising the implementation of existing programs).

Growing. As more projects or activities are completed, behavioural public policy may see wider recognition among policy makers. Behavioural science experts and advocates can focus on ensuring their results and advice are being translated into policy outcomes, to avoid the possibility of being seen as discretionary or irrelevant. Staff networks or communities of practice can help ensure consistent quality, messages, and ethical practices across the government's growing behavioural science activities. Official strategies or directives from leaders can help drive and direct continued uptake.

Maturing. Further into the mainstreaming journey, behavioural science experts and advocates can consider tackling policy topics or internal processes that have not yet seen targeted attention. Managers can think about ensuring the sustainability of behavioural interventions over time and at scale to address

likely questions about their long-term impact and effectiveness. With the luxury of an established reputation, there may be opportunities to experiment with newer applications of behavioural science, such as earlier in the policy cycle. Governance models and structures for behavioural science expertise could also be revisited to ensure they are working as intended.

This report is focused on high-level guidance that readers can adapt to suit their particular and dynamic context. Throughout the report, however, we have highlighted practices that are more likely to be useful earlier or later in a government's or organisation's mainstreaming journey. A dedicated chapter then collates these, and provides a series of case studies of how particular governments have matured their practices.

Complementing other OECD guidance

This report complements previous OECD work that tackled specific aspects of doing behavioural science in government, including:

- a guideline and visual roadmap for choosing the most fit-for-purpose research method for a particular policy question (Varazzani et al., 2023[34])
- good practice principles for the ethical use of behavioural science in public policy, including easy-to-use checklists and example practices (OECD, 2022[35])
- how to integrate a behavioural lens into crisis response and fast-paced decision-making, drawing on case studies about influencing COVID-19 pandemic behaviours (OECD, 2020[3])
- the BASIC Toolkit: a generic project methodology for applying behavioural science to policy questions (OECD, 2019[36])
- advice on how to consider behavioural science at each phase of the policy cycle (OECD, 2019[37])
- a comprehensive review of the functions, activities, opportunities, and challenges of the global behavioural public policy community, including more than 100 case studies (OECD, 2017[15]).

Box 2.1. OECD publications on related topics

The OECD has released guidance on topics related to behavioural public policy, including:

- the good governance of evidence (OECD, 2020[38])
- building capacity for evidence-informed policy-making (OECD, 2020[22])
- public sector innovation (Kaur et al., 2022[31])
- people-centred justice (OECD, 2021[39])
- the fair and responsible use of artificial intelligence (Berryhill et al., 2019[40])
- regulatory policy and behavioural economics (Lunn, 2014[41]).

More formally, the OECD has issued recommendations or declarations on:

- public policy evaluation (OECD, 2022[42])
- enhancing access to and sharing of data (OECD, 2021[43])
- public sector innovation (OECD, 2019[44])
- access to justice and people-centred justice systems (OECD, 2023[45])
- improving the quality of government regulation (OECD, 1995[46])

Finally, the OECD has published its own behavioural analyses and research on specific policy topics, including:

- **Sustainable consumption**. The Environmental Policies and Individual Behaviour Change surveys in 2008, 2011, and 2022 explored the drivers behind household behaviour and how policies may affect decisions in key consumption areas (OECD, 2023[47]). Other OECD work has applied behavioural science to energy consumption (OECD, 2023[48]), sustainable tourism (Varazzani, Sullivan-Paul and Tuomaila, 2023[49]) and food choices (Vringer et al., 2015[50]).
- **Environment**. In 2017 a collection of 36 case studies of behavioural insights interventions was published (OECD, 2017[51]). In 2012, the Directorate for Environment published working papers exploring how behavioural insights can be effective in informing green action, including research on default settings (Brown et al., 2012[52]) and moral crowding out by monetary incentives (Brown, Alvarez and Johnstone, 2015[53]).
- **Reinforcing democracy**. The OECD has published on the application of behavioural science to mis- and disinformation (OECD, 2022[54]) and public communication (Alfonsi et al., 2022[55]), contributing to the OECD's Reinforcing Democracy Initiative (OECD, 2022[56]).
- **Consumer policy**. The OECD has explored the role of behavioural science in informing consumer policy since at least 2017 (OECD, 2017[57]), including through a series of recent papers (OECD, 2022[58]).
- **Organisational behaviour**. In 2020, the OECD published research applying behavioural science to changing the behaviour of organisations, with a focus on fostering elements of a safety culture in the energy sector (OECD, 2020[59]).
- **Public sector management**. In 2021, the OECD published a working paper on how a behavioural science lens could help address the shortcomings of traditional regulatory approaches (Drummond, Shephard and Trnka, 2021[60]). In 2022, the OECD published advice on using behavioural insights to promote the uptake of supreme audit institutions' reports and recommendations (OECD, 2022[61]). And in 2018, the OECD published guidance on how to use behavioural science insights when designing integrity and anti-corruption policies (OECD, 2018[62]).

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