

5 Objectives

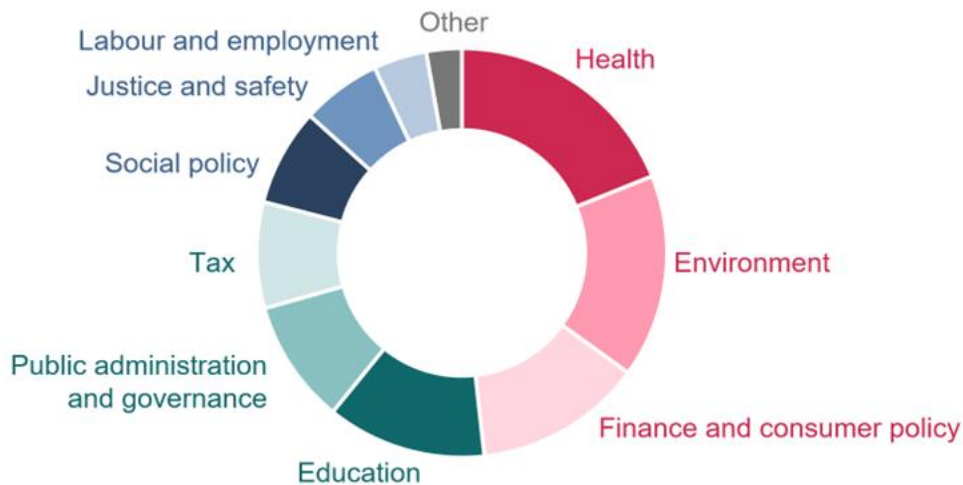
Given the diverse policy topics to which behavioural science can be relevant, and the diverse evidence synthesis and production activities that can be useful to policy making, it can be helpful for governments to clearly establish where and how they want to use behavioural science. **The principles in this section call for a clear strategy that is monitored over time, and which considers using behavioural science for both external policy (involving citizens, businesses, and other stakeholders) and internal policy (the processes and mechanisms of public administration itself).**

Why this matters

Behavioural science experts can contribute to a wide range of policy topics. Practitioners have uploaded projects to the OECD's online behavioural science Knowledge Hub on diverse policy topics, including large numbers on health, the environment, finance and consumer policy, education, and public administration and governance (OECD, n.d.^[11]).

Figure 5.1. Policy topics benefiting from behavioural science

Behavioural science experts are conducting projects across diverse policy topics



Source: OECD behavioural science Knowledge Hub (OECD, n.d.^[11]), n=143 (as of October 2023)

Behavioural science experts can also engage in a wide range of activities within those various policy topics. Our survey respondents' most common activity was providing advice relying on existing evidence – advice on both policy implementation and policy design. It was also common for respondents to generate new evidence based on their own experiments or data analysis.

Respondents working in newer teams were less likely to report doing almost all of the activities asked, suggesting it takes time for organisations to establish the processes, relationships, and tools necessary to

deliver a range of behavioural science activities. Respondents working in older, more established teams were particularly likely to provide advice on policy design and to conduct their own experiments (all teams 10 or more years old reported being involved in these activities).

Table 5.1. Behavioural science activities in government

Survey respondents are involved in various activities as both knowledge brokers and evidence producers

Age of team (years)	10+	5 to 9	Under 5	Total
Providing advice on policy implementation relying on existing evidence	91%	94%	77%	83%
Providing advice on policy design relying on existing evidence	100%	83%	71%	77%
Conducting experiments to measure behavioural impact	100%	83%	65%	72%
Delivering training and education	73%	85%	63%	66%
Evaluating behavioural impact in other ways	82%	65%	65%	61%
Analysing data about individual behaviour to look for patterns and/or predict behaviours	73%	71%	54%	59%
Publishing your work externally	55%	54%	25%	37%
n=	11	48	48	134

Note: Which of the following activities has your unit been involved in? Age not known for all respondents' teams

Similarly, we see survey respondents use a range of methods to measure if their proposed interventions have the desired effect: 66% report using randomised controlled trials or A/B tests; another 69% report using surveys; and 62% report using before and after comparisons of the target outcome (n=134). We also know from other engagements with the community that qualitative research methods (such as interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic fieldwork) have become increasingly common (Ewert and Loer, 2021^[2]; Hopkins and Lawlor, 2023^[3]).

Good practice principles

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

A central document, which articulates the value of applying behavioural science in the context of a specific political and institutional context, can help policy makers know that using behavioural science is an expected part of their policy making practice. A defined strategy or multi-year plan that clarifies how and where behavioural science should be adopted can help direct resources appropriately and focus the efforts of various actors to produce timely evidence where it is most needed (Dewies et al., 2023^[4]; Young, 2021^[5]; OECD, 2022^[6]; Shaxson, 2019^[7]). Attaining agreement at a senior level creates an authorising environment that enables responsive, self-initiated efforts by individuals or agencies while ensuring these are aligned with the government's strategic direction. A strategy could guide coordination across an organisation, a whole government, or even across levels of government.

A strategy could be a standalone document dedicated specifically to the uptake of behavioural science (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2023^[8]). Alternatively, behavioural science could be included in related strategies for evidence-informed policy making, people-centred government, innovation, or similar; for most respondents to the OECD's 2016 survey, behavioural science was part of a wider organisational reform and change agenda (OECD, 2017^[9]). At its most formal, a commitment to using behavioural science evidence and methods could be made in legislation. Once truly mainstreamed, it may be appropriate for references to behavioural science to simply be embedded into general strategic plans as part of business-as-usual operations.

A strategy could provide an opportunity to discuss, agree on, and disseminate positions on various issues, such as those listed below. In each case it may be beneficial to define these flexibly, to enable responsiveness to emerging opportunities and priorities, and creative applications of behavioural science:

Values: the values that will guide the government’s or organisation’s use of behavioural science, such as a focus on evidence, equity, people-centredness, actionable impact, integration, or collaboration (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2022^[10]; Aayush Agarwal, 2023^[11]).

Topics: the types of policy topics, government operations, or internal processes that will be the focus for behavioural science activities in the organisation, or clear criteria for how these will be selected. The aim should be to eventually apply behavioural science wherever it makes sense to do so. But this is likely to be a broad array of topics, so it may be necessary to moderate the ambition of the strategy in line with the organisation’s current level of behavioural science maturity, and the resources that senior leaders are willing and able to devote to behavioural science. When asked what factors help behavioural insights units be successful over time, two-thirds of survey respondents rated ‘Alignment with political priorities’ 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale of ‘Not important at all’ (1) to ‘Very important’ (5) (Figure 4.1).

Policy stages: how behavioural science will contribute at different stages in the policy cycle. It could be useful to explicitly note that behavioural science can play various roles, such as identifying problems, understanding drivers, designing solutions, enhancing implementation, and tailoring evaluation (Feng, Kim and Soman, 2021^[12]). Terms that imply a narrow scope of activities (such as ‘nudge’) can conceal the broader value of adopting a behavioural science lens (Hallsworth, 2023^[13]) (OECD, 2020^[14]). Behavioural science could be positioned as a useful approach to improve existing activities and augment existing expertise, rather than as a discrete entity that pursues its own priorities.

Activities: what the work of behavioural science will look like in the government or organisation. Activities conducted by behavioural science enthusiasts or experts could include capability building, evidence generation, policy advice, evaluation, oversight or review, facilitation, creative or critical thinking, network convening, or public engagement.

Methodologies: how behavioural science will be integrated with or coordinated alongside other policy making approaches to ensure effective outcomes for the organisation. Policy makers are often encouraged to adopt various lenses in their work, and to seek the support of people specialising in these various disciplines (such as behavioural science, service design, foresight, systems thinking, economics, communications, evaluation, data science, and so on). But a coherent vision across these advocates of behavioural and structural policy interventions “is highly unlikely to occur of its own accord” (Ewert, 2019^[15]). A strategy could articulate the value each adds to policy making practice, enabling policy makers to understand how and when to blend perspectives, and enabling any specialist staff to collaborate efficiently and effectively (Aayush Agarwal, 2023^[11]). While there are risks in trying to integrate methodologies that have different epistemological roots (OECD, 2019^[16]; Einfeld and Blomkamp, 2021^[17]), policy makers often find a combination of approaches and measures to be effective when tackling policy problems in complex systems.

Stakeholders: how the organisation will foster and steward the improved use of behavioural science across its network of partners. As policy makers increase their consideration of behavioural science evidence they will benefit from a bigger market of expertise outside government. There may be opportunities for these other actors in the policy system (such as think tanks, consultancies, industry bodies, implementation organisations, and so on) to engage more richly and robustly with behavioural science evidence.

Internal Guidance: how internal organizational functions can enable behavioural science work and what considerations may be appropriate while doing this work. This could include guidance on the roles that legal, human resources, privacy, communications and procurement groups within a government or

organisation can play in mainstreaming behavioural science while continuing to respect corporate commitments and policies.

Action plan: what organisational steps will be taken to embed and enable behavioural science work, and how these will be resourced. These steps could be based on this report’s other good practice principles to consider, for example, governance models and capability building.

At an early stage of behavioural science adoption, it may be useful to first conduct a review or scan before setting the strategy. The OECD has noted in the context of broader evidence-informed policy making that “organisations first need to gather information on current capacities, the desire for change, and existing barriers and facilitators of evidence use within the system” (OECD, 2020^[18]). Such a review or scan could help to identify where behavioural science would be most valuable, what the organisational constraints are, what capabilities already exist, and what is needed to begin to mainstream the approach (United Nations, 2021^[19]). The World Health Organization’s template of a workplace survey to identify key barriers to the adoption of behavioural science could be useful in this context (WHO, 2023^[20]). Scans can be conducted in different ways that may result in different outcomes. For example, workshops or bootcamps with policy makers may uncover various opportunities for behavioural science but not the leadership support necessary to tackle them, while official letters to senior leaders may elicit shorter lists that have the necessary authorising environment.

Early in a government’s journey of mainstreaming behavioural science, it can be useful to initiate activities with various expected time horizons. An agenda that includes shorter-term and longer-term objectives could enable pilot projects to quickly demonstrate the usefulness and relevance of behavioural science, while simultaneously laying the groundwork for bigger impacts that will take longer to realise, such as building capability across policy makers, scaling or implementing successful interventions, or redesigning internal processes for decision-making or data collection.

Once behavioural public policy is more established, managers may need to consider how to prioritise limited resources allocated to behavioural science activities (World Health Organisation, 2024^[21]). Criteria for prioritising work could include:

- aligning with senior leaders’ key priorities (see Principle 2 on building leaders’ support)
- potential for impact
- fit to the behavioural science approach
- stakeholder buy-in
- having existing data
- having a clear touchpoint with end users
- the feasibility of implementing a solution at scale (Shapsa Heiman and Israel, 2022^[22]; Barrows et al., 2018^[23]; Lecouturier et al., 2024^[24]).

Over time, the ambition of the government’s behavioural science activities could grow to cover new policy topics, intervention types, and research methods. A proportion of the resources dedicated to behavioural science could go towards developing new tools and approaches, to counteract any bias towards repeating similar interventions in similar policy areas.

Box 5.1. Examples of strategies

In **Australia**, the Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian Government (BETA) has a mission statement that connects its daily activities with the strategic objectives of the central agency where it is located. BETA proactively proposes behavioural science activities that support the delivery of key government priorities. BETA has also conducted ‘Opportunity Scans’ within particular policy portfolios and departments, helping to identify policy issues that would particularly benefit from a behavioural perspective, understand the skills and attitudes of the organisation’s staff, and build buy-in among senior leaders and relevant stakeholders.

In **Türkiye**, as part of a pilot behavioural science project run with external partners, the team organised a three-day bootcamp with policy makers from various departments. A brainstorming session provided a list of priority areas that were then given to managers as an argument for a long-term plan to mainstream behavioural public policy.

The behavioural economics initiative in **Israel**’s Ministry of Finance set its main goal as helping policy makers “develop critical behavioural thinking skills and a citizens-focused approach when designing public policies” (Shapsa Heiman and Israel, 2022^[22]).

In **New Zealand**’s Ministry for the Environment, and also in the **Slovak Republic**’s Ministry of Health, specialist teams have been established that explicitly combine behavioural science with systems thinking to develop comprehensive solutions to policy problems (Frame, Milfont and More, 2023^[25]).

In the **United States**, the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 requires agencies to publish various strategic documents that encourage a thoughtful and genuine interaction with research evidence. These documents include:

- learning agendas, which identify priority questions the agency has about how to better meet its mission and streamline its internal operations
- annual plans for significant evaluations
- policies for how the agency will deliver these evaluations
- capacity assessments of the agency’s ability and infrastructure to carry out evidence building activities, including the effectiveness and independence of their statistics, evaluation, research, and analysis efforts.

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

A commitment to embed behavioural science into policy practice may not have the intended impact of tangible changes to policy conversations, decisions, or outcomes. Regularly checking if the intended outcomes of the strategy are being achieved can help managers understand how to improve the government’s behavioural science activities over time (Curtis, Fulton and Brown, 2018^[26]). Committing to publish regular updates on the government’s progress mainstreaming behavioural public policy, for example, could act as an “external constraint” that motivates uptake (OECD, 2020^[27]).

It is inherently difficult to identify the impact of a particular approach or piece of evidence on government policy. In many cases the influence of behavioural science experts and evidence is indirect or difficult to measure in clear outputs or performance indicators. Furthermore, the more embedded a behavioural science perspective becomes – that is, the more business-as-usual policy work becomes people-centred and evidence-informed – the harder it is to isolate a discrete contribution from behavioural science.

Managers should therefore be flexible and pragmatic in how they judge the apparent effectiveness of behavioural public policy.

Managers could consider monitoring the behavioural science strategy as part of broader efforts to monitor the government's adoption of evidence-informed policy making (such as through regulatory impact assessments and policy evaluations). Monitoring or evaluation could also be conducted at the level of a particular project, external partnership, or dedicated team (Dewies et al., 2023^[4]). Managers and senior leaders could engage with internal or external evaluation and audit teams to assess the outcomes the impact that behavioural science is having on the government or organization and seek advice on future activities.

Managers could monitor inputs into behavioural science activities (such as number of in-house experts employed or money spent on related procurements), outputs (such as reports, presentations, or attendees at training activities), or outcomes (such as influence on policy decisions). Example measures could include:

- return-on-investment calculations (noting, however, that not all positive and useful impacts will produce attributable cost savings)
- the amount of demand from policy makers for behavioural science expertise
- the creation of new behavioural science expert positions throughout the public sector
- the calibre of applicants to the government's behavioural science positions
- the existence of behavioural science activities conducted independently of dedicated behavioural science teams
- qualitative feedback and lessons learned (gathered through retrospectives or post-mortems after each project).

Box 5.2. Examples of monitoring

In the **Netherlands**, the cross-government behavioural insights network sends reports to parliament about experimentally tested interventions every two years. This report is actively shared with senior leaders across the government. Furthermore, in-house behavioural science experts also report these results on the network's website. Since 2023, examples of behavioural analyses have also been added to this database.

Estonia monitors the impact of another approach to policy making, foresight, by tracking how often foresight publications are referenced in parliamentary debates, the media, and policy documents, and by collecting statistics on which agencies and political parties ask for and use foresight activities (OECD, 2021^[28]).

The World Health Organization (WHO) suggests that government organisations use its template staff survey to develop a baseline measure of the organisation's use of behavioural science. The survey can then be repeated in future years "to measure directional growth and maturation of the field as well as providing a mechanism to ensure the continued alignment of the strategy with the practical barriers faced by staff" (WHO, 2023^[20]). The WHO Regional Office for Europe routinely monitors its member countries' progress on advancing behavioural and cultural insights through five strategic commitments: build stakeholders' support; conduct research; apply insights; commit resources; and implement strategic plans (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2023^[8]). Countries' reporting requirements help build awareness of behavioural science among senior leaders and motivate them to support and drive behavioural science activities.

The United Nations monitors its mainstreaming of behavioural science by tracking the proportion of United Nations system entities that have a behavioural science strategy or action plan, leadership roles, centres of excellence, human resources, systematic training, dedicated funding, and programs for member states focused on behavioural science (United Nations, 2023^[29]).

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

A focus on the government's or the organisation's core business – that is, designing and delivering policies, programs, and services for the public – is central to mainstreaming behavioural public policy. But a secondary focus on the internal procedures that shape how that core business gets done has the potential to ultimately have powerful, cascading effects for the public. Improvements to the underlying standards, guidelines, norms, or structures that shape how government decisions get made could improve outcomes for citizens across a broad suite of policy topics, beyond those that behavioural science experts have the capacity to work on directly (Gauri, 2018^[30]). An approach of working on underlying organisational features, rather than on explicit projects, may also be more resilient to leaders' changing demand for behavioural science over time (Hallsworth, 2023^[13]).

Looking within the government for opportunities to apply behavioural science has the potential to make the organisation more effective generally (for example, by reducing biases in recruitment processes). The term 'behavioural public administration' has been used to describe efforts to improve the way governments operate by recognising that policy makers – both public servants and elected officials – are themselves susceptible to cognitive biases and social influences (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2016^[31]; BIT, 2018^[32]; Battaglio et al., 2018^[33]; Drummond, Shephard and Trnka, 2021^[34]; Hirsch and Wong-Parodi, 2023^[35]). The systems and processes policy makers operate in do not necessarily counteract these biases, and in fact they may exacerbate them (for example, in the ways that risks are perceived and assessed) (Viscusi and Gayer, 2015^[36]).

An internal focus can also help create the conditions – sometimes referred to as the 'choice infrastructure' – for influencing behaviours and outcomes across a wide range of policy topics (Schmidt, 2022^[37]). In the context of government services, for example, an organisation's performance metrics, incentives, and norms all contribute to an operating environment that shapes the behaviour of both citizens and the government employees they engage with (Downe, 2019^[38]). One useful model named SPACE suggests assessing and improving the following aspects of a policy system (Schmidt, 2022^[37]):

- Standards (broadly agreed-upon definitions and goals)
- Processes (formal procedures and guidance)
- Accountability (sense of ownership and commitment)
- Culture within systems (informal or institutional norms of what is acceptable)
- Evaluative feedback (mechanisms to understand system functioning).

Box 5.3. Examples of looking internally

Canada has a dedicated team in the Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer that focuses on applying behavioural science to people management and the future of work across the federal public service. This team has conducted a series of behavioural science initiatives ranging from increasing

digital workplace skills acquisition to developing tools to improve team cohesion in a hybrid work environment.

In the Canadian province of British Columbia, the central behavioural science team balances their effort between externally facing policies and internal procedures, such as records management, digital security, and human resources.

In **Türkiye's** Ministry of Trade, a dedicated behavioural science team organised a bootcamp event to gather opportunities for behavioural science across the organisation. This collaborative effort led to the development of an action plan that encompasses both internal and external priority areas. For example, the team helped create welcome packs for newcomers to facilitate their integration into the ministry by providing guidance on what to do in their initial days and fostering a sense of belonging.

In the **United Kingdom**, the Government Communications Service has been applying behavioural science to drive further improvements in organisational wellbeing and performance. This has included exercises designed to match high-level organisational values to the specific behaviours that those values represent, so that steps can be taken to identify barriers and solutions to the desired behaviours. It has also included team exercises run to develop action plans for responding to Civil Service People Survey results, a staff survey run across all UK government departments intended to measure civil servants' attitudes to and experience of working in government departments.

A robust critique of how internal and external policies get made could identify opportunities to challenge assumptions, engage diverse voices, and more appropriately embed policy decisions in their social, cultural, and institutional context (Straßheim, 2020^[39]).

Assessing Objectives principles

Governments may be interested in how they, or an external reviewer, could assess their implementation of these principles. The table below outlines questions to ask to understand the extent to which a government or public organisation has effectively defined its objectives for the use of behavioural science in policy making.

Table 5.2. Questions to assess Objectives principles

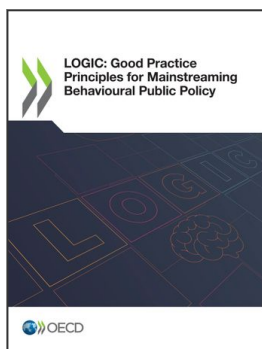
How has the government or organisation defined and prioritised its use of behavioural science?
How is behavioural science discussed in the government's strategies and plans?
Is there a plan specifying where and how behavioural science is relevant to the government's priorities?
Has there been a comprehensive assessment of the organisation's behavioural science capabilities and opportunities?
Has the government considered how behavioural science can complement and augment other people-centred, evidence-informed approaches to policy making?
Is there a plan to use behavioural science for shorter-term and longer-term results?
How are behavioural science activities and their impacts monitored over time?
Is the government or organisation tracking the inputs, outputs, and outcomes of behavioural science activities?
Are there specific metrics or indicators that are used to assess the success of behavioural science-informed initiatives?
Is behavioural science evidence cited in official documents that justify particular policy options?
Is human behaviour considered as part of policy makers' problem definition and analysis?
How is the government or organisation balancing the use of behavioural science for external and internal policy making?
Are behavioural science insights and methods considered when designing or improving organisational processes?

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From:

LOGIC: Good Practice Principles for Mainstreaming Behavioural Public Policy

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/6cb52de2-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2024), "Objectives", in *LOGIC: Good Practice Principles for Mainstreaming Behavioural Public Policy*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/6c40f5a3-en>

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