INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

Rapid policy making

How civil servants can make effective policies under pressure

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About this report

This report sets out the challenges civil servants face when working on 'urgent priorities' that fall outside the bounds of a genuine crisis or emergency, and the support they need to develop more effective policies under pressure.

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December 2025

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Summary

The past decade of government has been characterised by persistent instability and upheaval. Brexit, the Covid pandemic and geopolitical events have forced ministers and civil servants into a constant state of alert, normalising a culture of rapid policy making.

The Institute for Government has previously warned of the risks of rapid policy making – success stories are the exception, not the norm.[1] That warning remains true today. But in an age of 24-hour news cycles and fast-developing political circumstances at home and abroad, speed is an expected feature of modern governance – and sometimes unavoidable. This matters. As ministers turn to civil servants for fast advice, it is vital to understand how to produce it well.

This paper focuses on issues that demand a fast response but fall outside the bounds of genuine crises or emergencies. These can be driven by public outcry, media scrutiny or political imperatives, such as a minister's desire for an 'announceable'. The pressure of an urgent priority can create a 'burning platform' and act as a catalyst for officials to cut through bureaucracy and innovate to deliver results. But making policy rapidly without the full crisis-support mechanisms at officials' disposal – governance structures, playbooks and resource mobilisation – can force officials to short-cut or bypass entirely the fundamentals of 'good' policy making.*

This paper draws on an online survey of 135 policy civil servants, 32 interviews with civil servants and research institutes, six workshops with Whitehall officials,** a review of the academic literature and insights from the Institute's Ministers Reflect archive. It finds that rapid policy making can lead to:

- **Blurred goals, direction and scope**, with officials left interpreting vague briefings, navigating conflicting objectives and priorities, and unclear about where the authority to take decisions sits, creating confusion and delay.

- **Speed over substance**, where an announcement and visible delivery is prioritised over a robust option appraisal and proper implementation planning.

- **A closed process**, where engagement with external and internal stakeholders is stripped back, deprioritised or avoided, meaning the policy does not have the support of those critical to implementation.

- **Sidelining of data and evidence**, resulting in superficial analysis, rushed decisions and a failure to learn from the past.

* See Annex A for the Institute for Government's policy making fundamentals.

** Workshop attendees included representatives from No.10, the Department for Business and Trade, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Cabinet Office (including the COBR Unit).

- **Under-prepared, overstretched teams** that default to ways of working and resourcing models that are not fit for purpose, with staff wellbeing treated as collateral damage.

Recommendations in brief

Government needs to make three key shifts to better enable rapid, yet robust policy making:

- **Normalise a culture that empowers people to take risks** and embrace a 'test and learn' mindset.

- **Build on and scale existing tools, systems and processes** that can facilitate fast, informed action.

- **Recruit and invest in people** so they have the skills and capabilities to thrive under pressure.

These recommendations offer a practical roadmap across three levels of ambition:

- **Quick wins** – low-cost changes to improve current practice.

- **Deeper reforms** – that require greater investment and appetite for change.

- **More radical change** – structural shifts to reshape how the civil service operates under pressure, within existing boundaries and norms.

Quick wins

Culture	Tools and processes	People
Ensure spending approval processes incentivise appropriate risk-taking, iteration and adaptation as more is learned about what works	Create flexible resourcing models that enable senior leaders to rapidly mobilise the right people and skills to deliver on an urgent priority. Make it easy for teams to access timely, trusted expertise and challenge when working at pace. Set an expectation that constructive challenge early in the policy making process is required to ensure risks and unintended consequences are surfaced and addressed before implementation. Support officials to rapidly connect, share knowledge and identify relevant expertise under pressure, removing any unnecessary frictions or obstacles.	Equip policy officials with the skills and knowledge to thrive and develop robust policy advice under pressure. Ensure civil servants who work on urgent, high-profile projects for extended periods are properly rewarded and supported to maintain morale and wellbeing.

Deeper reforms

Culture	Tools and processes	People
Equip policy leaders to effectively steward policy in high-pressure, fast-moving contexts, ensuring decisions remain coherent, evidence-based and implementable – with risks fully acknowledged and mitigated. Ensure core standards for policy professionals include a commitment to agile policy making that enables officials to respond effectively to fast-changing circumstances.	Create the conditions to successfully roll out emerging technologies and tools to facilitate policy making at speed. Improve institutional knowledge management to minimise duplication of work when time is short. Ensure teams working on urgent priorities are multi-disciplinary by default to increase the likelihood of successful implementation. Ensure departments can flexibly recruit – and make effective use of – external specialist expertise in compressed timeframes. Ensure Priority Resourcing Teams are staffed by the most capable policy officials.	Develop tailored training modules to equip policy officials with the skills and knowledge to adapt and deliver at pace. Ensure team leaders are prepared to lead and manage teams under pressure.

More radical change

Culture	Tools and processes
Ensure the senior civil service performance management framework incentivises and rewards 'test and learn' and policy stewardship. Ensure recruitment processes attract and identify those who can confidently operate in rapidly evolving political contexts.	Develop mechanisms for officials to rapidly generate insight or test policy options with the wider public. Departments should not only operate under all the same IT systems, but they should have standard memorandum of understandings to enable data sharing, especially when time is limited. Departments – supported by the Cabinet Office – should formally establish joint teams for cross-cutting policy challenges – initially targeted at government priorities – that can be stood up at pace.

Introduction

The pressure to deliver quickly in government is not new. However, the emergence of a 24/7 media culture, the influence of social media and the disruptive effects of Brexit and the pandemic – exacerbated by a merry-go-round of political leadership over the past five years – have made rapid policy making more common and an expected feature of modern governance.[1]

The Labour government has said it wants to operate differently, aiming to deliver a 'decade of national renewal' with a focus on the long term.[2] But sometimes the pressure for quicker action is unavoidable. Large-scale systemic crisis, such as the 2008 global financial crash or the WannaCry cyberattack in 2017, or emergencies, such as the North Sea oil tanker crash in March 2025, demand rapid decision making, and ministers can choose which response structures to activate to enable a swift response.

But not all urgent moments stem from full-blown crises. Governments also manufacture speed: some issues demand a fast response but fall outside the bounds of genuine crises or emergencies. These can be driven by public outcry, media scrutiny or political imperatives, such as a minister's desire for an 'announceable'. These situations do not pose an immediate threat to life or national systems but still require a fast response to uphold public trust, sustain political unity and momentum, and ensure government retains the cover and credibility it needs to deliver on long-term priorities. In these moments, speed is less about saving lives and more about protecting reputations – and the ability to move fast can make or break a government's grip on its agenda. In short, it is a crisis for government, but not necessarily the country.

This government has already faced such moments – from the swift U-turn on cuts to personal independence payments (PIPs) to a series of Home Office announcements intended to demonstrate greater control of the immigration and asylum system amid rising public concern and political pressure.[3] For the civil servants responsible for advising ministers, the stakes are high and time is scarce.

Speed is often the government's choice – but it must be aware of the risks

At its best, rapid policy making has showcased the civil service at its strongest and helped advance progress towards significant objectives. For example, the Windsor Framework agreement, rapidly finalised in early 2023 under Rishi Sunak, provided the foundations for addressing long-standing tensions around the Northern Ireland Protocol following Brexit.[4]

However, rapid policy making also carries risks. Under pressure, policy officials are left with limited choice but to bypass or compress key elements of the 'optimal' policy making process – neglecting the fundamentals of good policy making. Since 2011, the Institute for Government has consistently argued that certain principles are essential

if policies are to deliver real impact, which broadly align with key stages of the policy process outlined in the Green Book.[5] These include:

- setting clear goals
- being open and evidence-based to inform a thorough appraisal of options
- focusing on implementation with clarity on the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of different actors across the system
- building in mechanisms for feedback, iteration and evaluation.

Side-stepping or compressing key stages can result in short-term gains, but poor long-term outcomes with costs to the taxpayer and the people directly affected by the policies.

This dynamic has played out repeatedly. During the coalition years, the government pushed through 'big bang' reforms in a range of policy areas with far-reaching consequences. For instance, the 2012 Health and Social Care Act – reportedly "cooked up purely by the politicians in Downing Street over 12 days" – triggered the most extensive reorganisation in the NHS's history.[6] Few have hailed this as a success in the years since.[7]

Just three years later, the Transforming Rehabilitation Programme, launched ahead of the 2015 general election, radically reshaped probation services. The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) concluded that the programme left "probation services [...] underfunded, fragile, and lacking the confidence of the courts".[8] It was ultimately – and expensively – reversed just two years later.[9]

Beyond the coalition years, in 2022, the Johnson administration rapidly expanded the skilled worker visa route to include care workers in a bid to address labour shortages. It set "pace...[as] the number one criterion", helping to ease staff shortages in the short term.[10] However, the PAC recently concluded that speed came at the expense of robust consideration of non-compliance and increased the risk of migrant workers being exposed to exploitation.[11]

These are just some examples – there are many more.[12] Together, they underscore the importance of balancing political ambition, speed and quality in policy making.

Box 1 **Definitions**

For our purposes, rapid policy making – sometimes referred to as fast-paced or urgent policy making – refers to situations where government develops policy under compressed timelines and heightened pressure. These moments unfold across varied timescales: some require same-day submissions for ministerial announcements; others involve condensing multi-year strategies into just a few months. Even within longer timelines, bursts of intense activity – such as fast-tracking policy advice to meet a specific deadline – can create a sense of pressure and urgency for civil servants.

We are specifically interested in instances triggered by:

- **political imperatives**, such as a ministerial desire for an 'announceable' and speedy results to achieve a specific objective
- **public demand or media pressure**, often following scandals, high-profile events or public campaigns
- **time-sensitive events**, for example an international summit, fiscal events or legislative deadlines
- **direction from senior civil servants**, including accelerating work to align with the priorities of a new minister to build credibility.

This report

This report explores what happens when government opts for speed – and the support policy officials need to deliver policy advice quickly but robustly. We focus on the challenges and trade-offs that may be under-acknowledged by those commissioning the advice in the first place.

The first section presents the realities of rapid policy making for civil servants drawing directly on their experiences and testimonies. We highlight the trade-offs officials make under pressure, the real-world impact this has on services and outcomes, and the human toll on the officials themselves.

The second section sets out practical recommendations for how civil servants can be better supported to deliver rapid yet robust advice to ministers. These recommendations are not an endorsement of rapid policy making. Rather, they recognise that speed is sometimes necessary – and the civil service must be equipped to handle it well.

The final section outlines an experience map that identifies the 'pain points' civil servants face and suggests practical, 'in the moment' solutions. This will inform a digital toolkit for release in 2026, providing grade 6 and grade 7 civil servants with a practical playbook for fast-paced policy making.

1. Fast policy, frayed processes – from the officials' perspective

Drawing on a survey, in-depth interviews, focus groups with current and former civil servants and case studies, this section captures the realities of rapid policy making from officials' point of view.

Blurred goals, direction and scope

Officials lacked clarity about what was being asked of them

> **"If you don't know your own mind, don't blame the civil service, because they will try and interpret what you're saying and no doubt they'll get it wrong because you haven't thought it through."**[1] **–** ***Sir Robert Buckland, former Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, and Secretary of State for Wales***

Rapid policy making can be a breeding ground for ambiguity and tension between ministers and officials. Officials may find there is insufficient ministerial time or appetite to engage with fundamental questions of the real-world problem that is at stake. This can lead to mixed understandings of the goals and objectives, leaving officials unclear about what is expected of them. Junior officials often feel this more acutely because they are further removed from initial discussions with ministers. As a result, the original policy intent can get lost in translation – leaving them with only a partial understanding of the brief.

They lacked clarity about who was making key decisions

Decision making structures in emergencies – such as gold–silver–bronze command structures – can help streamline authority and reduce ambiguity. But in urgent but non-crisis policy making, teams may skip establishing appropriate decision making structures altogether or fall back on existing ones that are not fit for purpose. This can leave officials muddling through with unclear leadership, competing lines of accountability and fragmented decision making – even more so when multiple ministers and sets of special advisers (spads) are involved. As one official who attended our workshops recalled:

> **"Suddenly a spad from another department would pop up out of nowhere and start weighing in and suggesting a different focus or direction. It didn't help move things forward – if anything, it just added to noise and confusion."**

Without a clear understanding of who is responsible for making the final call, teams can get stuck – repeatedly interpreting instructions, second-guessing decisions, and ultimately failing to move forward.

The work kept expanding and the policy attempted to do too much

The Green Homes Grant scheme launched in 2021 illustrates this well. The scheme aimed to deliver £2 billion in vouchers to meet the partial cost of green home improvements. From the outset, it aimed to address both a short-term Treasury objective – economic stimulus – and a long-term goal of strengthening the UK's energy efficiency market to support net zero targets. These multiple objectives translated into unrealistic timelines for delivery that left applicants frustrated, resulting in low levels of take-up and a scheme that underperformed in both its environmental and economic aims.[2]

Speed over substance

Ministers wanted a 'one and done' solution

Another pattern frequently seen in rapid policy making is a ministerial preference for a 'one and done' solution. This can often be rooted in a desire to announce quick results to the public, reflecting both a ministerial awareness of the limited time horizons of their political careers and, potentially, their reluctance to publicly acknowledge uncertainty about their policy choices. But it can force officials to narrow down options quickly with an over-reliance on familiar or pre-existing ideas at the expense of a robust option appraisal and enough flexibility to iterate the policy as more is learned about what works (and doesn't).

One official we surveyed reflected:

> **"We said we were very iterative, but really, we were flying by the seat of our pants. Partly this was down to a culture of 'not wanting to make mistakes/show that we were only 50% there on things', which is what iterative means."**

In some cases, carefully deliberating and assessing options – and managing risks and long-term implications – is not only compressed but neglected entirely because of a single-minded focus on delivery. One survey respondent recalled:

> **"We were being asked to plan how we'd manage legal aid reductions in [the] budget but there was no option to argue that the total level of cuts would be counterproductive [...]"**

The ability to test, learn and adapt is absent, increasing the risk of unintended consequences, ethical oversights and policy failure.

There was no time to consider how a policy would work in practice

Even in more 'normal' times, the practicalities of implementation are often overlooked and end-to-end delivery thinking is rare, but putting plans together rapidly can make the policy–operational divide worse.[3] It is common for operational teams to be handed projects without any prior engagement on feasibility. Ministers, for their part, can be reluctant to admit that something may not be deliverable and – as one official put it – "red risks in the register are frequently dismissed".

This issue is compounded when officials are asked to retrofit policy after an unexpected ministerial announcement. As one official in this position told us, the policy making process was "[n]ot iterative at all!" and that "[t]he iteration is being done now [months later] as we work through what this thing we've announced will look like". The result is policy that satisfies an immediate political demand, but likely requires significant course-correction down the line.

The early development of universal credit illustrates this. The white paper that launched it was developed rapidly and published six months after the coalition government came to power in 2010. The urgency around developing the paper, however, meant the team did not initially involve technical and operational experts, with key teams working from different locations across the country. This led to a poor understanding of implementation challenges. Outcomes improved significantly once this was addressed during the project reset.[4]

A closed process

They lacked the permission or bandwidth to engage with others leading to a closed policy making process

When time is tight, traditional engagement processes – like running consultations, meaningfully engaging stakeholders and analysing hundreds of responses – can become impractical. Policy makers often end up 'economising' on engagement, accepting the risk that their options won't be sufficiently tested or supported. In some cases, engagement is bypassed altogether for fear it will hinder rapid decision making; in other instances, it becomes tokenistic. One official working on infected blood compensation said: "We did a consultation, but it was pretty meaningless because we didn't have enough time to properly engage with responses."

Such experiences – where stakeholders offer views and expertise but see little evidence of their input in final decisions – can lead to disillusionment and disengagement from future consultations, weakening the policy making process. Rushed engagement – particularly when initiated late or under tight timeframes – can also undermine its legitimacy and strain the relationships essential to successful implementation.

Ministers/senior decision makers held information tightly

At times, officials forego engagement not only because it is time-consuming, but because of a ministerial or senior official fear of leaks. Sometimes this caution is justified to protect sensitive negotiations or avoid premature scrutiny. But if overused and applied indiscriminately, it can foster a bunker mentality where officials withhold crucial information from stakeholders, junior colleagues and departmental counterparts – which can ultimately backfire, as one official explained:

> **"Our approach was not to share the full detail of the policy with stakeholders because we didn't know what they would do with the information. So, one time, we changed the legislation without testing it with the stakeholders it affected. Of course, they weren't happy and threatened legal action. We had to make further amendments … in a week… over the holidays. It was intense, stressful and entirely avoidable."**

They didn't have the time or energy to build consensus – across departments, with delivery partners or even internally

Speed can restrict openness and consensus building, particularly across departments – whether because officials do not know who to contact and don't have time to find out or assume, based on past experiences, that engagement will slow the process.

But working in a silo comes at a cost, especially if ongoing efforts are not made to properly work through tensions and reach collective agreement. This is especially true when it involves No.10 or the Treasury. One official, reflecting on such a situation, said:

> **"The brief had come from No.10 and we spent several months working on [this] – thinking everything was on track and we had the No.10 cover. Only for then No.10 to intervene at the final hour. We then had to spend a month convincing them of our plan – time we didn't really have."**

This highlights a deeper issue, too: when policy teams are pushed to deliver at pace, they may proceed on the optimistic assumption that they have done what they need to do to secure cross Whitehall alignment only to see it unravel at the end.

Sidelining of data and evidence

They were unable to gather evidence or apply past lessons

The sidelining of data in policy making is well documented, but pace can intensify this. Civil servants often choose to push on with limited information rather than work through contested and/or uncertain evidence – a choice that can prove counterproductive. An official delivering advice on health policy ahead of a spending review process told us that "none of the work made it into the [spending review] because it did not have a sufficiently strong evidence base, due to the compressed timeframes", concluding "it was a hectic rush for nothing".

At other times, officials are not consciously foregoing data and evidence; poor knowledge management practices result in a duplication of efforts. As one official involved in a major Labour priority told us, it has "felt like we are building an evidence base from scratch. But this must be like the 10th [time we've done something like this] in last 10 years?"

Under-prepared and overstretched

Everyone was stuck in the old ways of working

In fast-paced policy making, the issue is not always that key steps are skipped, but rather that processes are not revised to suit the demands and urgency of the situation. Policy officials often fall back on default ways of working: from lengthy email chains, rigid clearance processes – which one official lamented are "the biggest barrier to rapid policy making" – and standard governance processes.

This disconnect often extends beyond policy teams to ministerial private secretaries and operational and functional leads, many of whom continue operating under 'business as usual' assumptions. Without recognising the urgency or escalating demands, they may miss the signals that a policy issue requires immediate attention. This can leave policy teams waiting for input or decisions that never arrive.

It was difficult to assemble a team at pace that had the right people with the right skills

Current structures make it difficult to get the right team in place to deliver quickly and effectively. For instance, Priority Resourcing Teams,* set up to be flexibly deployed in support of high-profile or urgent work, are often overstretched or difficult to access – with some arguing that the process for doing so is too opaque. This means senior officials often need to decide whether to pursue protracted, formal processes or prioritise use of speedy, informal processes.

Frequently, senior leaders choose the latter: relying on ad hoc and semi-formal arrangements, such as sounding out colleagues, issuing expressions of interest, or searching talent pools to identify people with the right mix of skills, subject matter expertise and capacity. While faster, this approach can limit diversity of perspective, background and expertise.

Occasionally, leaders must rely on volunteers or staff who have been 'voluntold': individuals instructed to work on the high-profile priority without genuinely volunteering to do so. While this can save time spent recruiting, it introduces its own challenges, including mismatched skills, mixed motivation and effectiveness. One civil servant we interviewed reflected on their experience of leading a team with mix of volunteers and volun-told staff:

> **"Looking back, I realise what we needed wasn't just more people – it was people who could deal with the pace or at least who wanted to work at pace. Otherwise, just getting any type of person in would've just left us with the same problem that we had: some people working flat out and some doing the bare minimum because they either weren't suited to the pace of work or just didn't want to be there."**

Sometimes the issue isn't about having the wrong people, but not utilising the right people in the right way. Efforts to bring in external expertise are often hampered by slow bureaucratic processes and when it is brought in, teams may have limited time and capacity to onboard and make best use of them. As one civil servant explained: "We had a politically appointed independent adviser [on the project], but no one really told them what to do or how to integrate their work with the team. They could have been helpful but wasn't the case."

* Priority Resourcing Teams provide flexible, rapidly deployable support to high-priority projects. The teams vary significantly in size, scope and make-up: from small units of half a dozen policy officials covering a single direct general group to upwards of 100 policy officials covering an entire department or agency. The teams act as departmental centres of policy excellence and pride themselves on the ability to adapt and deliver in fast-moving environments.

The workload felt unmanageable and led to burnout

> "Working 65 hours a week for six months straight. We received overtime payment, which was nice, but my team was still burnt out." – *G6/7 interviewee*

Sustained high-pressure working often requires individuals to abandon boundaries between work and outside life to be constantly available and 'on call'. Yet the structures that normally support wellbeing during a genuine crisis (e.g. shift teams) are typically absent in urgent, non-crisis situations. Officials are expected to operate at crisis pace while relying on business-as-usual working practices and processes – the 'worst of both worlds'.

There is no formal system for rewarding or recognising fast-paced work. Officials told us about the availability of overtime schemes, but in most cases, they were expected to return to business-as-usual work with no meaningful acknowledgement or compensation, except, as one official joked, the "pleasure of being someone asked to do it again".

This disconnect between the demands of the situation and the support and reward structures in place can take a real toll on officials, affecting both their wellbeing and morale. One official working in animal welfare explained how by the end of the project all bar three left the initial team of 20, "taking their knowledge and skills with them" after the project had ended.

There was no middle ground: either officials were thrown in the deep end or disempowered

> "Secrecy in negotiations is a pain [especially when everything is moving quickly]. It corrodes the working environment. People don't know what is going on and are navigating in ambiguity. It doesn't feel very empowering [for junior staff]: a conversation happens in a quiet room; decisions are made and then you're told what to do." – *SCS interviewee*

The sense of urgency in rapid policy making scenarios can create an environment conducive to significant 'on the job' learning, exposure to senior stakeholders and first-hand experience with complex problems. Junior staff may find themselves stepping into roles that accelerate their growth and career progression. But at times there is insufficient time to train or support, leaving them feeling "exposed and vulnerable".

In some cases, pace can also crowd out opportunity for development. In the interest of speed, key decisions may be made at senior levels – "behind the bike shed" – without involvement of the wider team, undermining the opportunities they are given to lead or think strategically. Over time this can create a two-tier system, one group with experience of and insight into rapid policy making, and another without the experience and training to step up and lead others when needed.

This weakens departmental resilience. Without deliberate efforts to spread the demands of policy making more evenly and to embed learning into the process, this can undermine succession planning and the ability to respond effectively to future policy demands – urgent or not.

2. What needs to change

This report has focused on the challenges, constraints and trade-offs civil servants face when making policies under pressure. Ultimately, they lack support to deliver quality policy advice under pressure. But tight timeframes do not make effective policy making impossible. With the right support and enabling conditions, civil servants can deliver advice that is both quick and robust.

Government's approach to crisis policy making offers useful lessons here. Genuine domestic or international crises can unlock senior attention, resources and a shared sense of purpose rarely seen in 'normal' times. They create – or at least sharpen the need for – clear goals, streamlined processes and openness to external expertise. These behaviours reflect the principles of effective policy making and demonstrate that speed does not have to come at the cost of them.

The principles of the COBR model – which provides high-level co-ordination and decision making in the event of major or catastrophic emergencies – can be usefully applied to other forms of fast-paced decision making:

- the need to demonstrate a clear 'grip' of the issue
- the benefits of greater professionalisation and a predictable playbook for delivering rapid yet robust advice
- the value of a shared, trusted evidence base to support collective decisions
- the importance of keeping meetings action-oriented, with the right ministers and officials in the room.

There are also consistent examples of effective policy making during a crisis that those working on an urgent commission can learn from. For instance, during the 2007 foot and mouth outbreak, Defra's response illustrated how government can achieve speed without sacrificing robustness. COBR was activated within hours of the first confirmed case and contingency plans put in place immediately. Multiple expert forums – introduced after the 2001 outbreak – ensured rapid access to trusted evidence.[1] This approach helped contain the outbreak far more effectively than 2001, reducing disruption and economic damage.

Beyond these cases, officials who had experience of crisis policy making reflected that it could be a positive experience, but only when leadership created the right environment. One survey respondent, when asked to consider what had helped in a crisis, noted:

> **"Building a mutually respectful relationship with a key special adviser (we had not known each other before at all). [A] DG who was able and willing to engage more than typical for a single policy issue, had relevant experience, and was calm, and balanced constructive challenge and support really well."**

Another recalled:

> **"I remember on [project] there was consistent messaging from the G[rade] 6 and D[eputy]D[irector] about implications of working at pace. They repeatedly told us that, 'mistakes would be made but it wouldn't be the fault of any one person. It was just the price of working at an impossible pace. Everyone just had to do their best.' It was reassuring."**

The lesson is clear: that speed can work when there is clarity around goals and risks, senior attention and 'grip' of the issue, flexible decision making structures, rapid mobilisation of resources and expertise, and a willingness to iterate and adapt. These practices should not be the reserved just for crises.

Recommendations

Our recommendations build directly on the notion that rapid policy making is possible under the right conditions. Drawing on lessons from both crises and non-crisis situations, we argue that government needs to make three key shifts to better equip officials to navigate the demands of policy making under pressure:

Normalise a culture that empowers the civil service to take risks and embrace a 'test and learn' mindset

The Labour government has signalled that it wants the civil service to be innovative and operate more like a start-up – echoing the ambitions of previous administrations, from David Cameron's 'open policy-making' agenda[1] to Dominic Cummings' call for "weirdos and misfits" to work in Whitehall.[2] Test and learn is particularly relevant to rapid policy making where speed, experimentation and adaptability are essential. The shorter gap between policy and delivery creates opportunities to build in feedback loops and adapt to strengthen the quality of fast policy making.

But adopting a 'start-up mindset' will not happen overnight. As Georgia Gould, speaking then as a parliamentary secretary at the Cabinet Office, pointed out, this kind of change requires conditions where officials "feel safe to innovate, to take risks, and to learn from what doesn't work as much as what does".[3] This type of shift depends on an open dialogue and trust between ministers and civil servants. Civil servants must be actively encouraged and even rewarded to surface risks early as well as take them.

Build on and scale existing tools, systems and processes that can facilitate fast, informed action

From priority resource teams to AI tools that speed up evidence synthesis to departmental submission repositories that help officials learn from previous advice, there are mechanisms to support fast, informed policy making. However, their use in Whitehall is patchy and inconsistent. They can – and should – be adopted, adapted and disseminated more effectively across all levels of the civil service and intentionally embedded into rapid policy making processes.

Recruit and invest in people so they have the skills and capabilities to thrive under pressure

Ensuring rapid policy making is done effectively depends on mobilising expertise when you need it most. The civil service workforce must have the capability, capacity and confidence to act and to lead through steady state, and in times of urgency.

Reforming all three areas above will take time – so we offer a menu of options across three levels of ambition: ranging from 'quick wins' that enhance the status quo, through to 'deeper reforms' and 'more radical changes' that could improve how the civil service operates under pressure within the confines of what is possible under the current system.

There are bolder, more radical reforms that could radically change how the civil service operates in times of urgency. These recommendations are a starting point for discussion. We invite others to share ideas about what else might be possible.

Quick wins

Ensure spending approval processes incentivise appropriate risk-taking, iteration and adaptation as more is learned about what works.
Treasury business cases or – as a start, departmental level business cases – should be utilised to support a culture of test and learn. The business case approval process could be revised to define acceptable risk, mandate teams to set out how they will test, adapt and scale plans, and formally create pathways for piloting.

Create flexible resourcing models that enable senior leaders to rapidly mobilise the right people and skills to deliver on an urgent priority.
This could be achieved by departmental permanent secretaries and chief people officers proactively designing their operating model to support fast-paced policy making. This would mean going beyond priority resourcing teams and intentionally shaping organisational structures that build flexibility into the workforce, enabling leaders to quickly assemble cross-functional teams, shift capacity and respond to urgent priorities.

Make it easy for teams to access timely, trusted expertise and challenge when working at pace.
This could be achieved by departmental policy, evidence and analysis teams working together to ensure that all policy directorates have access to standing expert advisory boards and 'on call' academic panels. Both forums should operate under signed non-disclosure agreements and appropriate security clearances.

Set an expectation that constructive challenge early in the policy making process is required to ensure risks and unintended consequences are surfaced and addressed before implementation.
As an example, departments should embed 'red-teaming' – structured sessions where trained officials stress test assumptions and surface risks – as standard practice.

Support officials to rapidly connect, share knowledge and identify relevant expertise under pressure removing any unnecessary frictions or obstacles.
A potential way to achieve this is for the Policy Profession Unit to not only continue to publicise its People Finder platform but mandate that all policy professionals register on it as part of their onboarding. Individual profiles should include details of projects worked on, policy areas, technical expertise and contact information. These changes would enable officials to search for not just known contacts but for contacts with relevant expertise – even outside their networks.

Equip policy officials with the skills and knowledge to thrive and develop robust policy advice under pressure.
As a start, the Policy Profession Unit can work with departmental policy profession teams to update induction and learning offers – including their universal policy offer currently in development – so they include a focus on the fundamentals of working in fast policy environments. Materials should cover core policy frameworks and processes as well as essentials officials should do if under significant time pressure, drawing on the collective insights of priority resourcing teams and crisis response teams.

Ensure civils servants who work on urgent, high-profile projects for extended periods are properly rewarded and supported to maintain morale and wellbeing.
This could be achieved by policy directors, deputy directors and grade 6s – working with relevant HR leads – to put in place clear reward plans for officials who work on urgent, high-interest projects for a sustained period. This offer should include formal recognition (e.g. including use of financial rewards), protected recovery time and access to development opportunities and support with transition to new roles, if applicable.

Deeper reforms

Equip policy leaders to effectively steward policy in high-pressure, fast-moving contexts, ensuring decisions remain coherent, evidence-based and implementable – with risks fully acknowledged and mitigated.
For instance, the Policy Profession Unit should provide structured training to all SCS and G6/G7 civil servants to reinforce the core competencies of effective policy stewardship – particularly in high-pressure, fast-moving contexts. This training should focus on the importance of a rapid risk assessment of the policy brief (including the risks of speed), constructive challenge, and how officials can clarify the aims as central behaviours for policy stewards.

Ensure core standards for policy professionals include a commitment to agile policy making that enables officials to respond effectively to fast-changing circumstances.
This could be achieved by the Policy Profession Unit embedding agile principles into policy standards, formally recognising 'test and learn', and all that it entails, as a core part of good policy making. This will mean adhering to agile policy making principles including iterative development, early engagement with delivery partners and openness to changing course based on feedback and evidence.

Create the conditions to successfully roll out emerging technologies and tools to facilitate policy making at speed.
In particular, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) should create mechanisms to successfully scale and embed existing technologies and tools to facilitate rapid policy making. UK government tools such as Consult and the AI Knowledge Hub (with use cases and helpful prompts for AI use) and international tools such as Destiny (a digital evidence synthesis tool) or Polis (a collective intelligence service) already exist and are in regular use, or are being piloted to support critical

stages of policy making – from analysing responses to government consultations to understanding public perceptions and synthesising evidence quickly. To support safe and effective scaling, DSIT should learn from the successful roll out of the Government Communication Function's Assist, identifying the enabling conditions and mechanisms that made adoption possible.

Improve institutional knowledge management to minimise duplication of work when time is short.
For example, following the lead of HM Treasury, departments should have an easily searchable repository, accessible to all staff, of key submissions and evidence related to key departmental priorities.

Ensure teams working on urgent priorities are multi-disciplinary by default to increase the likelihood of successful implementation.
As NESTA has recommended, the Government People Group could work with departments to create deployable multidisciplinary teams. These teams could be led by a named senior responsible officer – comprised of technical and function specialists including policy, service design, delivery, communications, legal, finance and analysis – ready to be deployed to tackle the department's urgent priorities.[4] These teams should be supported by in-house departmental specialists.

Ensure departments can flexibly recruit – and make effective use of – external specialist expertise in compressed timeframes.
This would require the Cabinet Office to set out clear guidance for temporary recruitment and onboarding of external hires for project-based work and introduce greater flexibility in exceptions for external appointments. This builds on our Opening Up report recommendation that government needs to improve recruitment and onboarding and use of external expertise in the civil service.

Ensure Priority Resourcing Teams are staffed by the most capable policy officials.
Attempts to achieve this are already in train. To accelerate this work, the Cabinet Office led Priority Resourcing Network alongside the Policy Profession should lead a cross-government effort to standardise and scale rapid deployment models, while recognising inherent departmental differences. This includes reviewing existing departmental approaches to understand the benefits of different models in different circumstances; coordinating implementation of the common model across Whitehall; and ensuring consistent recruitment and training offers to ensure teams are staffed by the 'best of the best'.

Develop tailored training modules to equip policy officials with the skills and knowledge to adapt and deliver at pace.
For instance, the Policy Profession Unit, working with the Priority Resourcing Network, departmental policy profession teams and the No.10 Delivery Unit should develop standalone training and simulation-based modules for rapid policy making. The training offer should cover the core skills required in policy making, which are especially relevant for fast-paced, politically sensitive environments. This includes

effective policy stewardship, navigating impartiality, understanding the fundamentals of delivery, working with private office to manage priorities, and making decisions with incomplete or evolving information.

Ensure team leaders are prepared to lead and manage teams under pressure.
To achieve this, the Cabinet Office, working with the Policy Profession Unit and departmental talent teams, should introduce targeted leadership training for team leaders (i.e. grade 7 above). This training should cover essentials for managing a team under pressure, including how to lead in fast-paced environments and the role of a manager in maintaining team morale and wellbeing. To maximise impact, this could be incorporated into the accredited pathway for senior civil service line managers, ensuring consistent standards across grades.

More radical change

Ensure the senior civil service performance management framework incentivises and rewards 'test and learn' and policy stewardship.
For instance, the Cabinet Office should overhaul the senior civil service performance framework to hardwire behaviours that drive policy stewardship and a test-and-learn culture – like bold risk-taking, innovation, and strategic direction-setting. These changes should include the expectation of constructive challenge to ministers, especially when evidence or long-term outcomes are at stake. These behaviours must be measured, monitored and tied to reward and advancement.

Ensure recruitment processes attract and identify those who can confidently operate in rapidly evolving political contexts.
As we have recommended previously, the Cabinet Office should consider replacing or revising the civil service profiles. In the context of rapid policy making, changes should be made to better reflect the demands of policy roles in fast-moving political contexts. This will mean going beyond the current behaviours – such as delivery at pace – which are narrowly focused on speed, instead recognising the importance of effectively navigating ambiguity and changing objectives and iterating and adapting during implementation.

Develop mechanisms for officials to rapidly generate insight or test policy options with the wider public.
For example, the Government Communication Function could work with departmental communication and engagement leads to establish standing citizen panels, or at a minimum, panels that be quickly stood up and stood down to facilitate better engagement with the public at pace. This builds on a recommendation made by Demos.[5]

Departments should not only operate under all the same IT systems, but they should have standard memorandum of understandings to enable data sharing, especially when time is limited.

Departments – supported by the Cabinet Office – should formally establish joint teams for cross-cutting policy challenges – initially targeted at government priorities – that can be stood up at pace.

These teams should build on models like the Department of Health and Social Care/ Department for Work and Pensions work and health team or the Ministry of Justice/ HM Prisons and Probation Service Joint Strategic Policy Unit. They should not only be limited to policy officials, but include operational and functional specialists such as finance, legal, communication, commercial, analytical, and digital and data leads to ensure more effective policy design and implementation. To maximise their impact, these teams should be co-located to encourage greater communication, collaboration, accountability and decision making.

3. A toolkit for civil servants working at pace

> **"When I'm thrown into rapid decision-making environments (or support more junior staff in this position), I recommend that people should have a 'vivid sense of the right behaviour' – an intuition that they are doing it right and not messing it up." – *senior civil servant***

The Institute for Government is exploring the development of a new interactive digital tool. The tool will be a digital resource built on a simple insight: even the most capable professionals need support when the pressure is on. Surgeons use surgical checklists. Pilots follow pre-flight protocols. Crisis communications teams rely on frameworks. Resilience and response units – including the COBR Unit – work from well-rehearsed playbooks that guide action from the moment a crisis hits through to post-crisis reflection and learning.

But there is no equivalent for policy officials working on urgent issues that do not constitute a full-blown crisis or emergency. The stakes may not always be as high as national infrastructure risk or security threats but the core skills – clarity under pressure, structured decision making and confident communication – are just as essential. Where tools and guidance exist, they're dispersed, hard to access or too complex to use under pressure.

Our proposed tool aims to change that. It will be a streamlined, user-friendly digital resource – or 'playbook' – designed to be immediately useful to grade 6 and grade 7 civil servants.

This toolkit will not aim to solve all the problems officials face; instead, it will offer practical resources targeted at the most pressing challenges officials face. For example:

- a checklist for day-one decision making to help officials clarify scope and avoid policy creep
- an interactive team audit checklist to help leaders quickly assess whether they have the right mix of skills – such as policy, legal, digital and commercial – to deliver under pressure.
- short case studies and video reflections from officials who have navigated political dynamics effectively, including managing requests that test the boundaries of civil service impartiality
- a how-to guide for rapid external engagement in sensitive or time-constrained contexts

- a short explainer video introducing red-teaming as a method for stress-testing policy ideas, paired with a downloadable template to help teams run a rapid red-team session

- a guide for team leaders on maintaining morale and wellbeing during high-pressure delivery phases

- a transition checklist to help teams move from reactive response mode to business-as-usual delivery – covering handovers, governance resets and re-scoping work

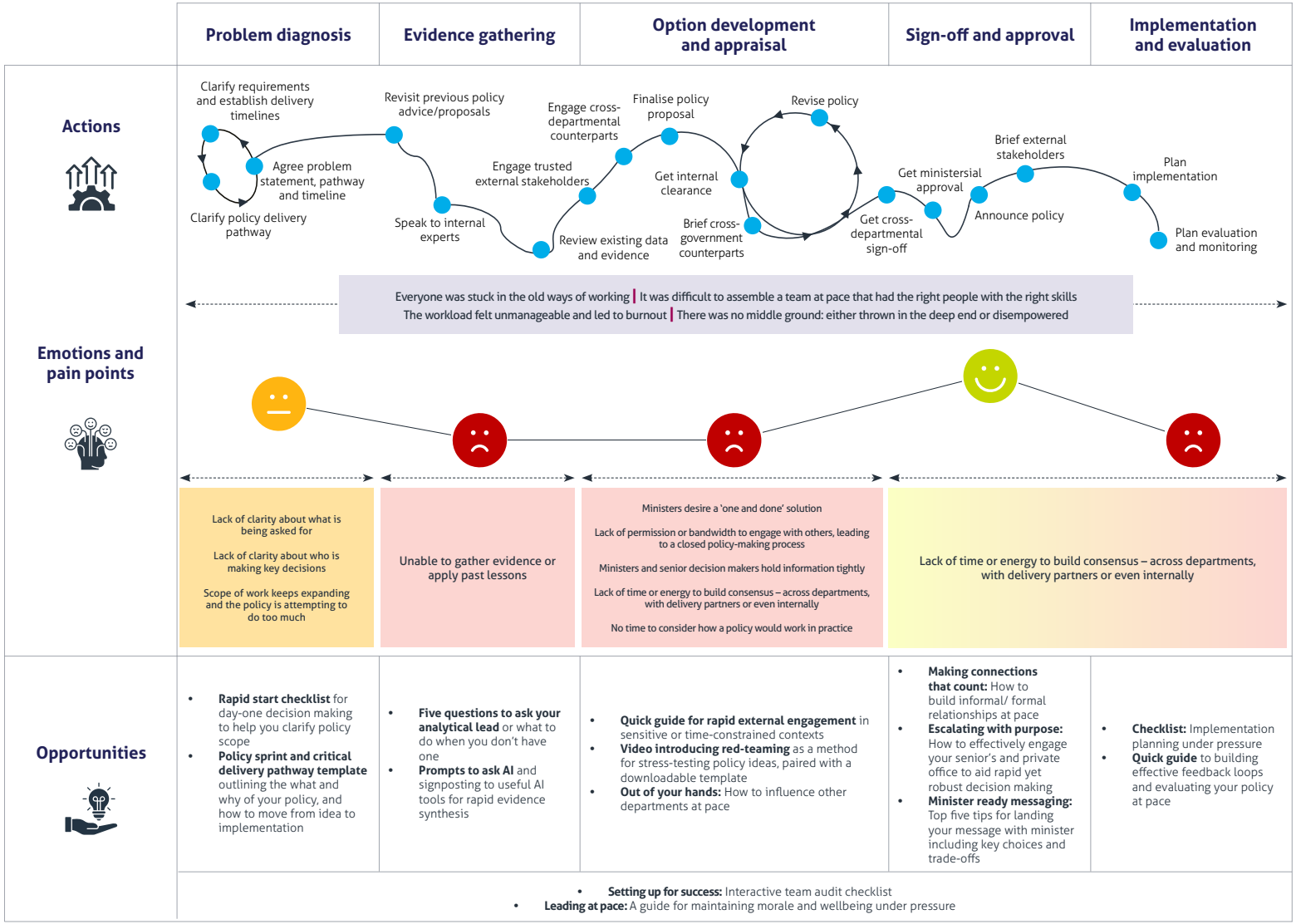
- a reflection guide for teams to capture lessons learned and reset priorities – useful for both immediate debriefs and future planning.

By acknowledging the real constraints officials face, the toolkit will aim to support more robust policy making at pace. An illustration of its components is found overleaf.

We welcome your input on what is most needed to support civil servants work more effectively under pressure. If you have ideas, needs, or feedback, please email policymaking@instituteforgovernment.org.uk.

Figure 1 Rapid policy making: From the perspective of officials

This user journey map is based on the lived experiences of Whitehall officials – capturing what it feels like to make policy under pressure. It highlights the steps, pain points and potential "in-the-moment" solutions that could support officials to deliver quick, but robust policies. This map will lay the foundation for our forthcoming digital toolkit. We'd love your views on whether these resonate and what else should be included. You can contact us at: **policymaking@instituteforgovernment.org.uk**



Source: Institute for Government analysis.

Conclusion

An urgent priority is always just around the corner. Without the right structure, behaviours and skills, civil servants' risk being caught off guard, leading to rushed decisions that undermine delivery, waste resources and result in poor outcomes. The system itself must also change.

This requires three key shifts:

- Normalise a culture that empowers people to take risks and embrace a 'test and learn' mindset
- Build on and scaling existing tools, systems and processes to facilitate fast, informed decision making
- Recruit and invest in people so they have the skills and capabilities to thrive under pressure.

If this is not achieved, government will – under pressure – continue to act in a frantic and superficial manner that results in bad policies that cost service users and taxpayers and erode public trust.

Annex: IfG's policy fundamentals

Our previous research has set out some fundamentals of 'good' policy making – principles that help ensure policies deliver real impact. In *Better policy making* (2022),[1] *The "S" factors* (2012),[2] *Making policy better* (2011)[3] and *Policy making in the real world* (2011)[4] we identified several themes common to successful policy making:

- **Clear goals:** Ministers and officials need to 'start right'. This includes being clear on the 'problem' they are trying to solve and developing a shared rationale for what they hope the policy will achieve. This sends a clear signal to those involved in design and delivery, provides greater focus and enables officials to more effectively manage trade-offs.

- **Evidence-based:** Officials should draw on a wide range of evidence, information and expertise about the policy issue and the range of levers that can be used to achieve the desired outcome, including lessons from elsewhere or previous attempts at change. This may require working across government to develop co-ordinated policy responses rather than focusing solely on the narrow set of levers the department has at its disposal.

- **Open:** Engaging widely across government and with the public, industry, local government and those with 'lived experience' can help policy makers develop a deeper understanding of people's experiences on the ground and what the 'real' problem or opportunity is. Officials should also avoid settling too quickly on potential interventions and levers and instead think widely and critically about the full range of options that could achieve a desired outcome.

- **Implementation-focused:** Implementation – and specifically the operational impacts on regulators and front-line delivery – should be factored in early by drawing on a range of skills and perspectives across the delivery landscape. Stress-testing policy proposals with a wide range of stakeholders – beyond the 'usual suspects' – can help build legitimacy, ensure policies land effectively and develop the consensus needed for policies to 'stick' in the long term.

- **Iterative:** Policy makers should build in 'feedback loops' to monitor impacts, learn quickly from delivery and adjust and refine the policy as more is learned about what works. Testing, learning from failure and course-correcting should be a routine and accepted part of the policy making process.

- **Evaluation-focused:** Policy makers should consider how success will be measured, the indicators that can be used to measure impact and how this information will be used to improve policy outcomes in the long term.

Doing all of this well relies on having the **right people and team in place** – this should as far as possible be multi-disciplinary and bring together a range of expertise, perspectives and skills – to enable rapid and effective decision making.

These principles are in line with the Policy Profession's standards, which include:

- Understanding and defining the policy context and purpose
- Using data, analysis and scientific advice effectively
- Enabling wide participation and engagement
- Focusing and collaborating on delivery options
- Monitoring and continuously improving policies
- And using evaluation throughout the policy process.[5]

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all those who supported this research whether by completing our survey, attending focus groups or speaking with us. We would also like to thank colleagues at the Institute for Government, particularly Tim Durrant, Jill Rutter, Alex Thomas and Hannah White for their feedback on early drafts of the report; Teodor Grama and Emma Conway for assisting with research and drafting, and Will Driscoll and Melissa Ittoo for their help in producing this report. The conclusions reached and any remaining errors are the authors' alone.

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