

User Centered Policy: Organization Assessment

By Alberto Rodríguez Álvarez, Dana Chisnell and Vivian Graubard

May 2020



User Centered Policy: Organization Assessment

The role of technology in delivering public services has grown significantly over the past decade, and the creation of organizations like 18F and the United States Digital Service has shown that technologists are eager and willing to roll up their sleeves and join the government.

Traditionally, these teams have focused on implementing policy, or fixing broken systems when they have gone off the rails. And, as we outline here, the same methods can be used upstream of implementation as government teams define problems, set goals and actually develop and draft policy solutions to address their mission.

This assessment document helps government organizations begin to take a user-centered approach to their policy making process and is a useful tool as any team plans to launch a new policy effort.

Why put users at the center of policy making?

If we put real people at the center of the services we build and bring together a cross-functional team to co-design both services and policy from the start, we'll produce better results and increase trust in the system.

If we design services and policies in a more people-centered, collaborative, data-driven and iterative way using modern tools and practices, we'll dramatically improve outcomes.

If we do the up-front work to design policies with human needs and implementation realities incorporated from the start, we'll save taxpayer dollars and potentially lives as well.

What is user-centered policy making?

User-centered policy is intentionally designed and implemented with the end user as a co-designer. We think of end users as people who use a government service, receive a benefit, or are impacted by a specific policy.

User-centered policy design is an approach to exploring a problem space openly, collaboratively, and with users, before a solution or service is decided. It also connects people from parts of government, advocacy, and the private sector to work toward a common goal as collaborators, and ensure that policies work as intended.

User-centered policy design draws on practices, methods, and techniques from participatory design and user experience design. It is a design-led process engaging different kinds of people and knowledge in public problem solving through process, principles, and tools.

How to use this assessment

This assessment tool is intended for public servants who are interested in a new way to define and solve public policy problems, but may not know how and where to start. This assessment is a starting point for policymakers and their teams.

We suggest that you use it as a template to set projects up to deliver the best possible outcomes for the people impacted by the problems you are trying to solve. By documenting the answers to these questions, you ensure that the entire team shares an understanding of who their users and stakeholders are, what metrics are being used to define success and measure progress, and which tools are available or need to be created.

This tool is for anyone involved in creating, implementing, or updating any public policy. It will help you rethink your strategy and find areas of improvement that will take you closer to delivering better outcomes for your users.

Not sure if this is for you? Here's a short questionnaire to help.

Should You Consider User-Centered Policy Making?

Are you involved in the delivery of services or public programs?	Y/N
Do you oversee or belong to a team responsible for administering public programs?	Y/N
Are you involved in the policy design or policy implementation process?	Y/N
Are you responsible for implementing a new or existing policy?	Y/N
Are you responsible for designing a new policy? (This can include legislation, administrative priorities, executive actions, public rule-making, etc.)	Y/N
Are you responsible for measuring the efficacy of a policy or program or are you eager to begin measuring the efficacy or success of a policy or program?	Y/N

If you answered **Yes** to any of these questions, then you play a role in the policy-making process and user-centered policy making is a great approach for you to consider!

*Beginning to ask the right questions
and moving toward
a culture of user-informed policy-making.*

Prep your project: Start with people

When approaching any part of a policy process, start by coming together with your team to answer these questions. The questions are designed to help everyone in the room direct the focus of the policy to the end user. Try to answer all the questions. Check them off when you have documented your answers. You can also download a printable version of these questions to share with your team [here](#).

Our theory is that when policy makers include internal and external stakeholders while planning and designing policy, answering these questions is easier and outcomes are better. The goal is to engage stakeholders throughout the entire lifecycle of the policy design and implementation process.

1. Defining the people involved

- Who is going to be affected by the policy or program?
- Who are we trying to help?
- If this policy is successful, whose life will be better and in what ways?
- Who have we talked to among the people using the policy or program?
- How are we including them in the design and implementation?
- How are we asking users for feedback?
- How often and at what stages are we incorporating that feedback?
- Who has a particular stake in the policy other than the final user?
- How are we approaching each stakeholder?

2. Defining success

- How can we best ensure that our policy or program has the intended effect?
- What does success look like?
- How will we know if we are succeeding?
- How are we measuring the success or goals we'd like to reach?

- What happens if this policy or implementation of this policy fails?
- Who and what will be harmed if this policy fails? And if it succeeds?

3. Defining the available tools

- If we cannot make a decision, who has the authority to resolve issues?
- Who in leadership is supporting the delivery of the policy or program?
- What are the technical components of this policy or program?
- How are we using technology right now for this policy or program?
- What is our current budget landscape to address this policy or program?
- How are we collaborating with procurement officers on designing a process that is agile, iterative, and open?
- How are we incorporating best practices in engineering, security, and design?
- Have key leaders used the policy solution or service, themselves?

Project design and execution

At this point, you know who will be involved in the project, whose outcomes you want to deliver on, and what success will look like if the project goes well. You also have a sense of the technology and platforms you can use which sets you on a path to be better equipped to deliver better outcomes in your policy area.

Use the information you now have to set the process up for success by including your users in every step of your policy process. Whether it is starting a new policy process, or adapting the one you already have, the answers to these questions can guide you towards a better policy making process and a better policy overall. You can revise your answers to these questions later in the process to see if you're addressing the problem you wanted to solve.

We would love to hear from your experience using this tool, [let us know how can we make it better](#).

We also encourage you to start deeper user research on the experience your end users are having in the problem space, to better suit their needs. You can find techniques and approaches to do that at <https://www.usability.gov/how-to-and-tools/index.html>.

About this document and the Delivering Better Outcomes Working Group

In the Fall of 2019, the Beeck Center joined with New America to create a cooperative project that includes a working group of 21 public interest, public sector, and private sector leaders who teach and practice user-centered policy design. We interviewed these experts to better understand their views and experiences. These interviews signaled the need to develop a tool that describes how teams in government could determine whether a user-centered policy process would be a useful approach for them and how to start asking the right questions along those lines.

With the working group, the Beeck and New America teams partnered with the National Conference on Citizenship to develop an assessment that includes two levels of guiding questions. The first level helps policy makers determine whether a user-centered process could be a useful approach for their team. If policy makers determine it would be a good approach, the second set of questions sets out a framework for planning and discussion to shift the mindset of their teams and begin the process of moving toward a more user-centered approach in their policy making process. These questions are a simple way to introduce user-centered policy making in any meeting or conversation to direct the conversation toward end users whenever discussing or designing public policies, and to provide more in-depth analysis during the actual policy-making process.

Related Best Practices

In addition to interviewing working group members from a range of backgrounds, we also reviewed several examples of user-centered policy design already in practice, including:

- Public Administration & Public Policy
 - [Unesco's Community Sustainability Policy](#)
 - [National Council of Non-Profits](#)
 - U.S. [Department of Justice Policy Development Checklist](#)
 - [The Promise of Co-Design for Public Policy - Emma Blomkamp](#), University of Melbourne

- Human-Centered Design and Service Design
 - [Idea/Google Design Prompts](#)
 - [The Scottish Approach to Service Design](#)

- Cultural Acknowledgement Practices
 - [Department of Arts and Culture Acknowledgement Guide to Acknowledgement](#)

There are, of course, many more examples and we will continue to seek them to learn from their ideas and best practices.