

Integrating design thinking into policymaking processes offers great value for citizens and government

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*Design thinking offers a powerful way to narrow the gap between what governments do and what citizens expect from government. **Michael Mintrom** and **Joannah Luetjens** explain how elements of design thinking, having already been successfully applied in social sciences research, are now being combined to produce powerful insights into citizen actions and their interactions with governments, and improve policymaking processes.*



The theory and practice of public administration is increasingly concerned with the role of the citizen. Scholars and commentators have pointed to a gap between what governments do and what citizens expect from government. In complex systems, the best intentions often have unintended consequences. In an era of increasing complexity, governments around the world are seeking new approaches to engaging with citizens, creating effective policies, and delivering well-targeted services.



What is design thinking?

Design thinking offers a powerful way to navigate this complexity. At its heart, design thinking involves empathetic engagement with the clients of government services. It requires policymakers to clearly understand the impact that their intended and actual policies have on different people. Too often in the past, government policymakers have lost perspective on the tough challenges that people face in their everyday lives. Those challenges rarely fall into neat little packages that can each be addressed by a different government department.

While policy development is a design activity, it is rarely spoken about in design terms. This is something we remedy in our [latest paper](#). We define design thinking as a problem solving approach characterised by curiosity and empathy, which seeks to interpret how target populations engage with their world.

How does this fit with policymaking processes?

Elements of design thinking have long been applied in social science research and in public administration. What is new is how those elements are now being combined to produce powerful insights into citizen actions and their interactions with governments. For example, let us look at problem definition. Rather than having policymakers define and understand the problem from an agency – or government – perspective, design thinking offers a [range of tools](#) and investigative techniques that allow different aspects of the problem to emerge. Sometimes the problem that is defined is not the problem that needs to be solved.



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Suppose a hospital routinely has long wait times in its emergency room. This can have significant detrimental impacts on health outcomes. The problem may be misdiagnosed as lack of staff or lack of funding. This is the problem from the perspective of the hospital. From the patient's perspective, the problem might appear very different. It might be the number of people to whom they need to repeatedly explain their situation, or the arduous form-filling they are required to undertake while also caring for their restless and tired children. Visually mapping these experiences – the patient's 'journey' – can help identify areas where services or processes can be streamlined, enhanced, or changed. There are many such recent examples of design thinking and its policy implications in both Australia and New Zealand.

Family by Family

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) was tasked by the South Australian Government to assist families experiencing difficulties and avert the need for them to have to make contact with crisis services, such as child protection interventions. Using design thinking strategies, such as [Open-To-Learning conversations](#), TACSI developed the [Family by Family programme](#) by explicitly asking people experiencing difficulties: "how can a new service enable more families to thrive and fewer to come into contact with crisis services?" The resulting programme reorients families at the centre of decision-making and offers something that professional services cannot: empowerment, human connections and relationships.

Family by Family links families that are seeking to change something in their lives with families that have successfully overcome difficult times and are prepared to share their knowledge with others. The family-to-family linkages can last from 3-6 months and begin with both families setting goals for their involvement in the programme. The pairs of seeking and sharing families then organise themselves depending on the goals that they have set. Making and sustaining these different goals requires a change in participants' values, beliefs, attitudes, and how they interpret a particular situation. This peer-to-peer learning model of family support seeks to address the growing demand on crisis services and the increasing number of families that are unable to manage chronic stress and isolation.

Challenging the status quo

Social interventions of this sort are not easy to effect. Whenever people face an unexpected dilemma it is common to search for solutions that are familiar to them. This can create both conceptual and practical traps. It is potentially much more productive – but much more difficult – to look past and challenge the existing solutions. Challenging how things have ‘always been done’ is an essential component of Open-To-Learning conversations. This, along with other approaches informed by design thinking, is critical to the success of Family by Family. Open-To-Learning conversations require people to go against their natural tendencies. They require people to go beyond the obvious and the incremental.

Following initial success in Adelaide, with an unprecedented return on investment estimated as AU\$7 for every dollar spent, this programme has been extended to New South Wales. In addition, the peer-to-peer learning model is now being considered with respect to refugees and migrant resettlement, addressing domestic violence, social isolation, substance use, disability, and tackling tough behavioural issues in the criminal justice space.

Where to next?

At present, design thinking in the public sector is varied and scattered. It is being pursued in one way or another across a range of government agencies. We demonstrate what works with design thinking and why. We offer lessons for those seeking to systematically integrate design thinking into policy development. We do not think design thinking should override existing forms of policymaking. In certain circumstances, traditional approaches to the design and implementation of public policy are necessary and preferable. However, there is great value in cataloguing best practice in the integration of design thinking into policymaking processes. The next step will be to understand and explore more fully the public impact that design thinking can have.

*This blog post is based on the authors’ article, ‘[Design Thinking in Policymaking Processes: Opportunities and Challenges](#)’, published in the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* (DOI: 10.1111/1467-8500.12211).*

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