A brief introduction to...

Human-centred design and behavioural science
What are Human-centred design and behavioural science?

When applying human-centred design and behavioural science, government designs policies and their implementation through the lens of the human characteristics of all those involved in the process.

It frames the questions, problems and solutions from the standpoint of the entire system or process, because this is how citizens in fact experience government actions. This highlights the importance of working across all relevant government interfaces, and serves to mitigate the challenges posed by siloed structures, which are often endemic to governments.

Ongoing contextual testing is a core component of human-centred methods, essential in accounting for the variance in human characteristics across different groups at different times. This includes developing quick and cheap prototypes and small-scale pilots that bridge the gap between policy and implementation.

What does it seek to achieve?

Human-centred methods focus on the lived experience and needs of individuals, acknowledging the limited capacity of policymakers and experts to anticipate and accommodate the complexity of human reasoning and action.

By recognising the limits of abstracting people into simplified, robotic and anonymous entities, putting the human at the centre facilitates more effective and efficient implementation, as a result of its emphasis on empirical research and the iterative experimentation of real-world practicalities.
What are the key success factors?

- Merging insights from human-centred methods with those from the relevant policy area
- Efficient platforms for outreach to, and feedback from, representative citizens and frontline officials
- Sufficient capacity and expertise on human-centred methods within government, rather than over-reliance on external consultants

Shifting policymakers’ attention towards what are often seen as mere tactical implementation features requires substantial adjustments. Institutional procedures and incentives can play a major role in ensuring that citizen-centric methods are applied at least before scaling or extending policies.

Things to look out for

The following table displays three specific challenges related to methods that put humans at the centre, as well as potential mitigating factors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Main challenges to address</th>
<th>Ways to mitigate</th>
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<tr>
<td>Impractical ideas</td>
<td>A focus on optimal design can underestimate crucial issues such as costs and any knock-on effects.</td>
<td>Involve experienced implementers throughout to manage organisational limitations.</td>
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<td>Cross-organisational work</td>
<td>Involving all links along a delivery process may be too cumbersome for successful coordination.</td>
<td>Permanent cross-process teams for quick communications and ongoing feedback.</td>
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<td>Constant testing</td>
<td>Validating adjustments to different human contexts requires a great deal of experimentation.</td>
<td>Building organisational capacity to continually run and evaluate small-scale trials.</td>
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Human-centred design
Methodically uncovering the human responses – of action and emotion – elicited by a particular implementation design, through genuine empathy with the individuals involved in the process.

Prototyping/pilots: creating policy prototypes and pilots that can be implemented and tested quickly, relying on real-time feedback from citizens. Testing potential interventions at an early stage allows for continuous improvement based on users’ real experiences and ideas before the policy is implemented on a larger scale.

Example:
Certitude, a UK-based charity, worked with the design-led social enterprise, Innovation Unit, to prototype and improve their services for Londoners with mental health issues or learning disabilities. The resulting social networking site proved to be successful, and has been scaled to include seven London boroughs to date. See: Centre for Public Impact, Briefing Bulletin: Design for policy and public services.

Root cause analysis: an analytical problem-solving tool to consider issues based on their root causes. The identification of the origin of a problem enables the treatment of faults in the underlying systems and structures rather than merely treating the symptoms.

Example:
The 1992 violence prevention initiative in California carried out a root cause analysis to understand, communicate, and ultimately tackle the root causes of violence in Californian society. See: Centre for Public Impact, The California Wellness Foundation’s violence prevention initiative (VPI).
Simulation of the user journey:

A simulation that enables government to understand stakeholders’ experience when engaging with a specific policy. By mapping a user’s journey from start to finish, government can understand exactly how citizens consume services, identify user expectations, and find potential weak spots in the delivery of a particular public service.

Example:

New Zealand’s government undertook extensive customer research, including simulating citizens’ service journey with government, to understand how best to design new – and improve upon existing – digital public services. See Centre for Public Impact, *Power to the people: New Zealand’s story of digital transformation*.
Behavioural science

Using empirical findings about the cognitive limitations, biases and fallacies that undermine rational decision-making to optimise or reshape interventions, often via “nudges”: micro-level changes to the way individuals make choices.

Setting defaults: humans have a strong status quo bias, naturally preferring the current state of affairs even if it is not in their best interest. Consequently, setting defaults that are aligned with the public’s or the individual’s interests when rolling out policies can substantially affect individual choices. Such defaults may be debatable on different grounds, but it is important to acknowledge that, whether intentionally or not, policies almost always involve a certain default option.

Example: In 2012, UK employers started automatically enrolling workers into retirement schemes, allowing them to opt out instead of expecting them to opt in. Initial results saw participation soar from 61% to 83%. Opting in workers by default has also been shown to increase pension savings significantly in countries like the US, Chile, Mexico, Denmark and Sweden. See: Centre for Public Impact, Briefing Bulletin: Behavioural Insights

Mobilising the herd mentality: humans are heavily influenced by the actions of others and by their desire to be part of a group. Describing desired behaviour in the context of other people’s choices can influence citizens’ individual preferences and actions.

Example: The Behavioural Insights Team in the UK, a social purpose company established by the UK government, found that adding a single line to a tax letter stating that most people in the recipient’s local area had paid up on time increased payment rates by 15%. See: Centre for Public Impact, BITs and pieces: how the UK led the way in behavioural insights
How do Human-centred design and behavioural science help achieve greater public impact?

CPI’s Public Impact Fundamentals are a systematic attempt to understand what makes a successful policy outcome and describe what can be done to maximise the chances of achieving public impact. Below, we have highlighted the elements of the Fundamentals that are most likely to be positively influenced by Human-centred design and behavioural science.
Further reading

**The Centre for Public Impact,**
The Public Impact Fundamentals, 2016

**Sharing Experience Europe,**
Design for Public Good, 2013

**Geoff Mulgan,**
Design in Public and Social Innovation,
Nesta, 2014

**Behavioural Insights Team, UK Government,**
EAST: Four Simple Ways to Apply Behavioural Insights, 2014

**European Report,**
Behavioural Insights Applied to Policy, 2016

The CPI team is grateful for the rigorous research conducted by Michael Mashkautsan.