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Human-Centred Policy: How Might We Rethink Policy Design With People at the Centre?

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Executive Summary

To restore trust in democracy and deliver on the promises that matter most to citizens, political leaders must go beyond good intentions by embedding the real experiences, needs and voices of people into the core of how policy is designed and delivered. Truly great policymakers make every attempt to include a diverse cross-section of citizens in policy development to maximise the positive impact on people and society.[1] But bureaucratic processes, complex delivery systems and a lack of capacity often dilute this ambition – even when a commitment to people-centred policies is in place.

Human-centred design (HCD) – an approach often leveraged by companies to create products and services, such as Apple's radically simple design of the iPhone – offers a way to cut through complexity to recentre human perspectives in the process of making policy.[2]This paper is not intended as a definitive assessment of the science of HCD, but rather as a lens for considering how its principles might help political leaders rethink policy. By integrating HCD with established best practices, governments can strengthen delivery outcomes and build greater political legitimacy.

The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change supports political leaders around the world to get things done – helping governments show their electorates that democracy can work for those it's meant to serve. As exclusive polling released by TBI earlier this year reveals, voters across democracies have lost faith in the status quo – not because of ideology, but because of a loss of belief in leaders' ability to achieve results. Populists are filling the gap, often offering the simplicity that voters crave and capitalising on the disillusionment of those who feel abandoned by the system.

“If we’re debating education, think about it as a parent. If the topic is healthcare, think about it like a patient.”

Tony Blair

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For leaders to govern effectively, and be seen to be doing so, they must understand how different groups interact with the state in different ways: the touchpoints they encounter, the quality of those interactions and the barriers they face. Designing policies and services around the ways that different groups experience government is essential to delivery.

The principles of HCD can contribute to building this understanding, but some in government are hesitant to apply HCD to policy, viewing the formal process as too costly or too slow to deliver visible progress. We believe otherwise. In this paper, we argue that applying HCD to high-level policy is both more urgent and more achievable than ever, as emerging technologies offer new tools to design around people’s real needs – and to do so at pace. For leaders, this is a matter of survival: if they don’t address the challenges people care about, deliver on their electoral promises and show progress, they are unlikely to be re-elected.

TBI’s work with leaders gives us a unique understanding of the information required to make hard choices, and where human-centredness fits into that architecture.[3] This paper presents a roadmap for leaders to transform policymaking by engaging communities early, co-designing solutions and prototyping, and iterating based on real-world feedback to develop policies that deliver with legitimacy.[4]

01

Introduction

Traditional policy development often designs around a single vision of how a citizen lives, acts and works. Human-centred design (HCD) goes one step further, recognising that citizens are complex, and embedded in social, cultural, planetary and economic systems. Understanding how different groups experience government allows leaders to anticipate delivery challenges early, design with realism and avoid costly missteps – ultimately improving outcomes and credibility.

> "Design is the mechanism that takes something from a current state to a preferred state."
>
> Herbert Simon

HCD is a problem-solving approach that places people – their needs, aspirations and experiences – at the heart of designing solutions. It is simultaneously a logic, a mindset and a process, guided by the values of empathy and curiosity, alongside rationality.[5] While HCD provides the foundational science of design, TBI focuses on applying the principles to real-world problem-solving, shaping the policies and programmes that directly affect people's lives. These principles inform the design of products, services and systems that are more inclusive and responsive – or, as design researchers Liz Sanders and Pieter Jan Stappers put it, created "with people, not just for them".[6]

Putting People First

Human-centred design principles offer a problem-solving approach that starts with people's real needs and experiences to develop policies, services and systems that work in context. The framework is grounded in four key principles:[7]

1. Identifying and addressing root causes rather than surface symptoms
2. Designing around people, not technologies or institutions
3. Understanding systems and interdependencies to avoid unintended consequences
4. Iteratively testing and refining solutions with those affected

In the policy domain, this means engaging citizens not just as recipients but as co-creators, ensuring that policies are responsive, equitable and credible. HCD helps leaders move from abstract intent to real-world impact by aligning political decision-making with the everyday realities of governance.

The private sector has forged ahead of the public sector in innovation by employing HCD as a mindset and process. From Apple's simplicity to Airbnb's user-led product, creating delightful, engaging experiences also yields rich returns: companies investing in quality design have 32 per cent higher revenue growth and 56 per cent higher shareholder returns[8] than their peers. In the public sector, human-centred design can help identify the unheard needs of communities and fill market gaps. Indeed, governments and political leaders have attempted to apply its principles for years. One recent example is the United States' "America by Design" executive order,

which created a National Design Studio and the position of Chief Design Officer – filled by Airbnb co-founder Joe Gebbia – to improve how citizens experience federal services.[9]

HCD typically follows five key stages:

1. **Empathise:** Identify the problem, for whom and why. Are you solving the *right* problem? (For example, why don't people access this service?)
2. **Define:** Synthesise insights to clearly articulate the core problem.
3. **Ideate:** Generate a wide range of possible solutions based on user needs and system constraints.
4. **Prototype:** Turn ideas into tangible models to learn fast, fail early and avoid costly missteps down the line.
5. **Evaluate:** Continue to test desirability (do people want it?), feasibility (can we build it?) and viability (will it work in the long term?) with real users.

And it uses a number of different techniques to put people at the centre of design:

- **User journeys and ethnographies** help leaders identify where delivery breaks down – avoiding reputational risks and improving real-world performance.
- **Interviews and empathy maps** enable policymakers to identify overlooked barriers to uptake or delivery.
- **Prototyping and rapid testing** to allow leaders to test ideas quickly, reduce risk and show visible progress – before committing resources at scale.
- **Visualisation and systems-mapping** clarify complex, cross-cutting issues, allowing leaders to align stakeholders and navigate institutional silos.
- **Non-standard service design** ensuring marginalised voices also shape the solution, making policies more just, inclusive and politically sustainable.

- **Futures-thinking** equips leaders to prepare for long-term challenges, enabling bold action to avert potential crises and anticipate changing needs, behaviours or complexities.[10]

So why bring these approaches into government? Because, like it or not, governments are, as notable design leader Christian Bason puts it, "the owners of public problems".[11] Poor design is every political leader's headache: when a policy fails, they are the ones left to deal with the consequences. And these same leaders are often trapped in a web of conflicting constraints that result in overly complex, hard-to-deliver solutions. HCD helps to reveal the real-world limitations that shape policy success. It helps leaders ask the right questions early on, such as:

- **Does the policy align with the leader's broader political narrative?** A policy's viability often depends on how well it fits within a leader's overarching political agenda and public commitments. This includes alignment with campaign manifestos, strategic factsheets or priorities previously outlined by the ruling party. Public statements by leaders or ministers – whether in speeches or policy documents – signal existing political investment in the issue. If a version of the policy has been tried before, past narratives and lessons can shape current support or resistance.
- **Can the policy be costed and budgeted responsibly?** For a policy to advance, it must be fiscally credible and timed with key budget windows. Leaders need to show how the policy fits into upcoming budgets or reviews and whether it can be phased in over time to demonstrate value for money. Existing cost estimates – from think-tanks or previous proposals – can inform financial planning. Understanding the policy's distributional effects is also essential: if it creates clear winners or losers, political strategies must be developed to manage trade-offs and build support.
- **Are key stakeholders likely to support or resist the policy?** Stakeholder support is critical to policy success. Leaders must gauge where influential interest groups – such as unions, business associations or advocacy organisations – stand, and whether they are likely to mobilise support or

opposition. Good policies should be designed to take into account their impact on key voting blocs, ensuring that core constituencies understand and back the proposed changes. Internally, the policy must navigate party dynamics, coalition agreements and existing commitments that could either bolster or hinder political momentum.

- **Is the policy implementable by government institutions?** Even the best policy ideas can fail if institutions can't deliver them. Leaders must assess whether relevant agencies have the tools, capacity and authority to implement effectively – and measure their targets to demonstrate progress to the public. Legal or regulatory hurdles may require new frameworks or alignment with existing rules. Skills shortages – such as in health care or data analysis – can also undermine delivery. Political will is crucial: without high-level backing, even technically sound policies can stall. Success may also depend on upgrading systems, such as digital infrastructure or procurement processes, to support smooth execution.

Often lost in these very real constraints are, of course, people. To meet the needs of politics, costs, stakeholders and government departments, HCD often comes last.

02

Putting Human-Centred Design First

In a world shaped by rising citizen demands, constant scrutiny on social media and complex global crises, it is now imperative to use the empathy, adaptability and responsiveness that HCD principles can offer. HCD is not only essential to modern policymaking, but it can also be a critical tool for political leaders to transform their governments and repair their connection with voters.

> "Be ready to revise any system, scrap any method, abandon any theory, if the success of the job requires it."
>
> Henry Ford

Taken from the Gates Foundation's Pathways framework,[12] we propose a blueprint for how leaders can embed HCD principles into their governing practices:

Start by identifying one or two key areas that are political priorities, are citizen-facing, are problematic and require significant personal empathy, such as health-care waiting times, disability-benefit programmes and unemployment. HCD means understanding not only the technical problems with health-care waiting times and benefit programmes, for example, but who is affected and why. Public resources and political attention are finite, so leaders must choose deliberately. Beginning with a few targeted areas will help to build momentum behind the HCD approach.

Within each targeted HCD reform, seek to better understand who the policy must reach and what is required to resource those needs. Map the ecosystem: what are the gaps and barriers, and who are the most underserved? HCD helps to uncover the incentives and frictions shaping behaviour: what is catalysing or blocking change? By mapping power and ownership – in other words, the politics – leaders can design strategies that overcome resistance and build stronger relationships.[13]

Considering the people who will be served by these programmes through various lenses – political, economic, social – to enable deeper insight, HCD helps to uncover these overlooked experiences and focus on structural drivers of the policy itself. When policies are designed *with* affected people, not just *for* them, citizens become active participants, which in turn strengthens the social contract. For vulnerable populations – such as the unhoused, who are often excluded from formal touchpoints with the state – improving interactions with government is critical to restoring trust and belonging.

With greater understanding of the people at the core of policy objectives, undertake an HCD co-design approach. Good ideas often fail if they don't account for lived experience or political resistance. HCD emphasises co-creation to understand journeys, motivations and challenges – so form focus groups of users and literally build the service with them, proposing, trialling and testing. This produces grounded, adaptable policies aligned with service realities and better political, economic and social outcomes. It also surfaces political concerns early – across ministries and communities – building coalitions and increasing the chance of successful delivery. Co-design often reveals that technical issues are political, requiring negotiation and reframing.

Evaluate impact by using human-centred data as a baseline. Too often governments assess the success or failure of a programme using technical impact measures – money spent, cases reviewed, technology implemented. People-centred metrics provide a fuller picture: were citizens satisfied with the service, and was it efficient? Did they get the information they needed? Were their concerns listened to by service providers? Did they feel heard? HCD uses tools for continuous feedback and adaptive learning, enabling

leaders to refine interventions in real time. Anchoring evaluation in lived experience helps track not only whether policies work but also how they work – and for whom. With technology, governments can aggregate marginalised perspectives alongside official data to personalise communication and strengthen alignment between the system and the public.

Human-centred design isn't just useful for shaping policy, it also supports successful delivery, especially in complex areas or those requiring behavioural change. By involving frontline users and implementers early, leaders can spot blind spots and resistance before rollout. This leads to more practical, deliverable policies and builds buy-in during development, not after.

03

In What Contexts Are HCD Principles Most Applicable to Leaders?

To date, HCD in policy has often been applied at the level of product and service delivery[14] or at most within a single system or department to avoid complexity. But the real opportunity lies in applying HCD to more complex, population-level challenges.[15]

There are several ways to do this, and a leader's "space to play" would likely involve the more complex elements of policy design. Building on a framework developed by design theorist Jay Doblin, there are eight areas where HCD can help leaders shape better outcomes and connect with the people they serve.[16]

1. Co-designing with communities: Participatory approaches rooted in co-design ensure that policies reflect the lived realities of those most affected by the very issue the policy seeks to solve, while creating public support through a sense of engagement. By involving communities directly beyond usual citizen consultations – such as in the housing-estate redevelopment consultation in Lancaster, UK,[17] or the Gates Foundation's Pathways programme approach in India, Nigeria and Kenya[18] – public services become more efficient and responsive to community needs and dynamics.

2. Designing products and services: Emerging technologies and human-centred approaches are transforming how governments develop and deliver public products and services. Tools such as AI, data analytics and digital platforms can help tailor services in real time, improving everything from policy compliance to user experience. These innovations can be deployed across the policy cycle – from identifying and mapping needs to generating and testing solutions. For example, in Seoul, South Korea, AI "consultants" help citizens to navigate government services. Governments should also

complement technology with behavioural insights and co-creation to ensure that services are more inclusive, responsive and accessible – especially for hard-to-reach or underserved communities.

3. Generating more inclusive solutions and addressing disparities: Equity-centred service design uncovers systemic barriers and charts them against community resources to target policy interventions. During Covid-19, Damn It, a programme funded by Research England,[19] used conversations with Brazilians in favelas to map what communities knew and how they were already acting to prevent the spread of the virus, so that interventions could be more intentionally designed around existing behaviours.

4. Implementing policy: Design principles can support the implementation of policy by helping governments translate abstract goals into practical actions that work for real people. This involves mapping how policies interact with the social and technical systems in which they operate, identifying friction points and iterating solutions in context. Tools such as service blueprints, user-journey maps and prototypes make these complex systems visible and actionable – not only for designers but also for policymakers, frontline workers and communities. For example, the US Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration[20] uses visual simulations to communicate infrastructure projects to the public, ensuring that what is delivered is not only functional but embraced by the people it is meant to serve.

5. Fostering national unity and social cohesion: Design principles can support leaders in crafting inclusive narratives that build a shared sense of identity, especially in politically sensitive or socially fragmented environments. Through strategic communications, leaders can engage diverse communities, elevate marginalised voices, and co-create messages that reflect collective hopes rather than entrenched divisions. By intentionally designing how issues are framed and communicated, this approach helps reframe polarising debates around shared aspirations and build public trust.

6. Futureproofing for longer-term policies: Speculative design enables governments to visualise possible futures and stress-test policies before implementation. It allows policymakers to imagine alternative scenarios, anticipate unintended consequences, and create policies that are more adaptive and resilient. This approach has been used to push the boundaries of public discourse, as in New Zealand's use of design to explore futures[21] beyond current public opinion. Because this involves bold visioning and cultural leadership, it is particularly well suited to national leaders who have the platform for future-orientated policy agendas to prepare societies for progressive change.

7. Exploring areas without predetermined outcomes: Experimental policy labs offer the creative and institutional space to test new governance models. These labs – such as MindLab in Denmark, the UK's Policy Lab or New Zealand's Co-Design Lab – bring together multidisciplinary teams to explore innovative responses to complex policy challenges. Their flexibility allows governments to work outside rigid structures and develop ideas iteratively, without the pressure of immediate, public-facing outcomes. This type of approach is exactly where HCD principles prove helpful to leaders – allowing them to experiment and iterate to create policies that citizens respond to positively in uncertain territory.

8. **Solving open-ended, complex "wicked" problems:**[22] Climate and ecological crises, inequality and health-system fragmentation force leaders to view problems as embedded and amplified by intersecting systems. These issues are considered "wicked" problems – too complex for linear solutions and requiring a response across departmental silos and political cycles. HCD offers leaders a structured way to navigate this complexity by starting with the lived experiences of those most affected, mapping systemic interdependencies and co-creating interventions with diverse stakeholders. HCD helps unlock cross-sector collaboration, test ideas before scaling and build long-term public trust – enabling leaders to align policies and resources towards meaningful, sustained transformation.

Conclusion

HCD has often been seen as too slow or too academic to be useful in policy. But when its principles are applied with the right framing, it becomes both a governing approach and a delivery tool – helping leaders move from intent to impact, pressure-testing policies before they land and surfacing friction points early. It works with the political cycle, not against it, by enabling faster feedback, clearer decision-making and quick wins that can be shown and scaled, all while being embedded into the mechanics of governance. Put simply, human-centred design gives leaders a way to make better choices, avoid reputational risk and build trust.

The Tony Blair quote used in this paper is taken from On Leadership: Lessons for the 21st Century, *which is published by Penguin. The Herbert Simon quote used in this paper is taken from "Why Is Design Always Talking About Complexity?". The Henry Ford quote is from* My Life and Work, *via the Library of Congress.*

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Endnotes

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