



# OPTIMISING POLICY ADVICE SYSTEMS AT THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT

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**Digital Dialogue Briefing Note  
April 2025**

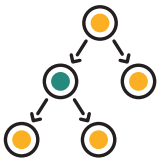


# INTRODUCTION

**The Digital Dialogues are virtual events convened by the Policy Innovation Lab at Stellenbosch University in collaboration with the Presidency's Policy and Research Services Unit. This session aimed to support evidence-informed policymaking and foster innovation in public sector by connecting South African policy actors with international peers.**

The dialogue brought together officials and analysts from South Africa and the Organisation for Economic Development and Co-operation (OECD) to discuss two themes: improving the quality and coordination of policy advice at the centre of government and strengthening digital transformation leadership. Drawing on the OECD's expertise, the session explored current practices, institutional trends and future reforms needed to make centres of government more effective stewards of cross-cutting policy and digital innovation.

This briefing note summarises the insights and implications for South African policymakers. It identifies systemic constraints, highlights reform opportunities and presents recommendations to guide institutional development and strategic planning at the centre of government.



## STRUCTURAL AND OPERATIONAL LIMITATIONS TO POLICY ADVICE SYSTEMS

**Governments face increasingly complex policy challenges, which are straining coordination systems, advisory processes and the use of evidence.**

In response, centres of government in many countries have expanded their roles. OECD data presented at the seminar shows that 71% of centres of government have increased their coordination functions since 2019, while 79% have broadened their scope to include strategic foresight, policy development, crisis response and performance monitoring.

However, these expansions have often lacked accompanying reforms in institutional design, resourcing and capability. Many centres of government still face major structural and operational limitations.

**Centres of government often lack the authority, capability or legitimacy** to drive whole-of-government agendas. Although expected to lead on priorities like climate action or digital transformation, their mandates may be unclear and coordination mechanisms weak. A lack of coordination, overlapping responsibilities and a lack of leadership clarity remain barriers.

**Embedding long-term policy thinking is difficult.** OECD data indicates that 42% of centres of government struggle to integrate long-term perspectives such as ageing, climate or AI into their work. This is worsened by short political cycles, institutional inertia and weak links between policy design and implementation.

**Inconsistent policy quality across ministries undermines coherence.** While some departments use structured, evidence-based processes, others rely on ad hoc approaches. In the absence of shared standards or systematic capacity-building, fragmentation continues.

**The relationship between political leaders and public servants is often underdeveloped.** Effective policy advice depends on trust and mutual understanding, but limited political engagement reduces the influence of technical work.

**Centres of government often lack the necessary skills and resources.** Key skill gaps include digital literacy, monitoring and evaluation, project management and behavioural insights. There is also a shortage of soft skills like stakeholder engagement and political navigation.



**Efforts to institutionalise evidence-informed policymaking remain weak.** Data access is limited, and there are few systems to ensure consistent evidence use. Poor knowledge management and the absence of formal evidence plans or systematic reviews prevent the development of a shared evidence base.

**Digital transformation faces coordination and capability challenges.** Although most countries have digital strategies and dedicated agencies, these bodies often lack clear mandates, enforcement powers and influence over departmental investments. Coordination with subnational governments and external partners is limited, and digital skills remain scarce.



## **OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN POLICY ADVICE**

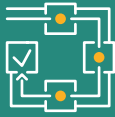
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Despite these challenges, there are several opportunities for South Africa to modernise its centre of government and strengthen systems of policy advice and digital governance.

**Centres of government can evolve from coordinators into strategic stewards of policy direction.** The OECD defines centres of government by function rather than form, including not only the Presidency and Cabinet Secretariat, but also entities responsible for budgeting, planning and evaluation. This approach enables the CoG to fulfil several key roles: setting priorities, building trust, stabilising during crises, promoting good governance and linking politics with administration. These roles should be formalised and communicated across government and to the public.

**The institutionalisation of evidence use should be systemic.** The OECD's framework focuses on individual skills, organisational incentives and cross-government systems. This involves designating evidence leaders, mapping capacity, developing cross-government evidence plans and improving data infrastructure.

**Digital transformation provides a strategic reform opportunity.** South Africa is already using some of the OECD's frameworks too. While most countries have strategies, many lack effective coordination, funding and stakeholder engagement. South Africa can address these gaps by establishing strong leadership, interoperability standards, shared services (e.g. digital ID, payments) and partnerships with external actors.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

To seize these opportunities and address challenges, the following priorities are proposed:

### Empower the centre of government

The centres of government should be recognised as the strategic centre for national policy direction, not just a coordinator. This requires clear mandates, political backing and adequate analytical capacity. The institutionalisation of the Presidency's role in planning, prioritisation and performance management should be deepened.

### Build an integrated evidence ecosystem

High policy quality must be a central public administration concern. South Africa could promote frameworks with common standards, training pathways and mandatory tools. Skills should be mapped across departments, with gaps addressed through professional development, secondments and competency-based hiring.

### Improve the coordination of digital strategies

National digital strategies must be supported by strong institutional arrangements. Shared digital infrastructure could be developed using a "government as platform" model. Funding should align with societal goals and coordination with provinces must improve.

### Address digital skills gaps through partnerships

Building internal capability is essential, but external partnerships are also needed. South Africa should work with universities, think tanks and the private sector to co-develop services and build communities of practice. Flexible staffing and competitive recruitment models could be adopted for technical roles, with revised pay structures for analytical professionals.

### Foster a supportive institutional culture.

Political and bureaucratic leadership are essential. Ministers and officials should be encouraged to value evidence, support innovation and use evaluations. Formal mechanisms can enhance legitimacy, while informal norms like openness and trust are critical for sustained reform.



## CONCLUSION

South Africa's Presidency is well placed to lead reforms that make public policymaking more coherent, evidence-based and citizen-focused. The insights from this dialogue provide a foundation for further reforms.

Strengthening the centre requires more than structural change. It also requires clarity of purpose, effective coordination and strong capabilities. By investing in policy advice systems, evidence ecosystems and digital strategies, South Africa can improve its ability to deliver on national priorities and maintain public trust.