

# Working With the Stock We Have:

## The Evolving Role of Queensland's Implementation Unit

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### Introduction

Queensland's Implementation Unit was established in March 2004, as part of a more general organisational restructuring of the Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC),<sup>1</sup> following the re-election of Peter Beattie's Labor government for a third term in office. The rationale for its establishment was clear – the Premier identified implementation as one of the weaknesses of his government during his second term (Menzies 2005, p. 13). Stung by criticisms of fatigue and inaction during the government's second term (Wanna and Williams 2005, p. 73), the Unit's establishment signalled the Premier's frustration with the performance of key ministers and agencies in giving effect to his policy agenda, and in particular the decisions of Cabinet (Parnell 2004). For a Premier personally invested in listening and responding to the public (see, for example, Menzies 2005, pp. 5-8; Scott et al 2001, p. 198), and committed to 'fixing' the problems of government (Preston 2003, p. 418; Wanna and Williams 2005), it was untenable this situation should continue. Though generally uninterested in the 'nitty gritty' of administration (Bureaucrat A; Menzies 2005, p. 14), Beattie indicated to senior DPC officials

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<sup>1</sup> During the restructure, the Community Engagement Division, a key focus of the second term (Scott et al 2001, p. 198), was transferred to the new Department of Communities. It was replaced by a new Trade and International Operations Division with responsibility for exports, overseas trade missions and representations and a new emphasis on security planning and coordination.

that he wanted changes to ensure Cabinet decisions were being implemented in a timely manner and that election commitments were being acted upon. Moreover, he wanted to avoid a repeat of the systemic failures of administration exposed by a Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC) inquiry into the state's child protection system.<sup>2</sup> Thus he was seeking both an oversight and a strategic capacity, though he would rely on his department to determine how this might be developed.

This paper describes the background to and rationale for the Implementation Unit's establishment and profiles its role, structure, functions and location within the Queensland core executive. Informed by interviews with key actors in DPC and line agencies, this paper reports significant developments in the period since the Unit's creation. It concludes that its first eighteen months have been developmental as the Unit overcame an uncertain start to consolidate monitoring and reporting (oversight) processes and systems across Queensland government. The period since the Unit's establishment has been the most tumultuous of the Beattie government's seven years in office. The government has been besieged by delivery failures in child protection, electricity supply, roads and, most damagingly, the state's public hospital system. These have exposed deep-seated capacity problems in the Queensland public sector, prompting internal debate about how such crises might be avoided in the future. The difficulties of the third term herald a more strategic focus for the Implementation Unit in the future – an emphasis on outreach, research and evaluation as it attempts to evolve central capacity for issue identification, prevention and early warning.

Because it is the only sub-national government under consideration in this symposium, the first section of this paper provides a brief overview of the Queensland political and administrative context.

## The Queensland Context

Implementation poses a significant challenge for sub-national governments (Davis 1995, p. 17). It is particularly difficult in Queensland, Australia's third most populous state, where because of

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<sup>2</sup> In June and July 2003, when *The Courier Mail*, published a series of articles that detailed harrowing allegations about the abuse of children placed in foster care. In late July, the Premier referred the matter to the CMC for investigation. Facing an election in early 2004, Beattie campaigned on a promise that the government would 'fix' the systemic failure of the Department of Families to prevent vulnerable children, particularly those placed in foster care, from being further abused and neglected (CMC 2004; Wanna and Williams 2005, p. 76). In its report handed down in January 2004, the CMC outlined 'a blueprint for reform' for Queensland's child protection system. Among its 110 recommendations were proposals to establish a new Department of Child Safety and the need for a whole of government approach to identification and protection of at-risk children.

Australia's federal system of government, responsibility for services including health, education and transport, by far the most significant areas of state activity, are shared with an increasingly interventionist and dominant Commonwealth government (Wanna and Williams 2005, p. 17). Implementation in Queensland is complicated by the state's large size, its diversity, and decentralisation (Davis 1995, p. 145; Menzies 2005, p. 9). Though it has made fewer forays into corporatisation and privatisation than other Australian states and territories (Wanna 2003), the Queensland government faces similar constraints on its capacity to achieve results. In critical areas like health, education and social welfare, the government depends on networks of actors in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. The current 'hospitals crisis' is a reminder that public sector professionals are sometimes the most difficult to manage (see, for example, Davis 1995, p. 145). Developing controls over a fragmented and geographically dispersed public sector has been a persistent dilemma for Queensland governments. As former Deputy Premier, Tom Burns, noted:

...we have control over major issues but no idea what's going on in lots of government. You are never sure what happens on the ground – you can't know except when someone complains (quoted in Davis 1995, p. 144)

Queensland has an eccentric administrative history, full of resistance to change and strong personalities (see, for example, Halligan and Power 1992, pp. 161-201; Wanna 2003, p. 380). Despite a tendency for Premiers to exercise strong central control (see, for example, Murphy, Joyce, Cribb and Wear 2003), coordinating routines and machinery are comparatively recent developments (Davis 1995; Scott et al 2001). For many years the Queensland public service defied or at least ignored managerial trends adopted enthusiastically in other jurisdictions (Davis 1993; Halligan and Power 1992; Selth 1993, p. 141). The state's public service was politicised, and remained 'professionally unattended' during the long years of the Bjelke-Petersen premiership (Coaldrake 1989, p. 73).<sup>3</sup> With a primary focus on service delivery, state development and the personal concerns of a dominant Premier, and long operated as a 'closed

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<sup>3</sup> Queensland was dominated from 1968-1987 by conservative Premier, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, whose idiosyncratic and highly personalised style of governance was controversial. Allegations of corruption against the Bjelke-Petersen government were investigated by a 1987 Royal Commission, the Fitzgerald Inquiry. It found evidence of widespread systemic corruption in Queensland's public institutions, including by Cabinet Ministers, the police service and parts of the public service. Its findings were a catalyst for significant reforms under the Goss Labor Government, elected in 1989 after 32 years in opposition (For a detailed overview see Coaldrake 1989). Queensland has the only unicameral parliament in Australia and has for years had an under-developed committee system, further inhibiting oversight capacity. Queensland is a 'winner-takes-all' state which has been characterised by having weak oppositions. The current state of the parties exemplifies this. The next biggest party in the state, the National Party (a Country Party derivative) currently has 15 Members in the Legislative Assembly.

shop' (Coaldrake 1993, p. 150), the Queensland public sector failed to develop the professional capacities of its Commonwealth and interstate equivalents.

The Goss Labor government (1989-1996) introduced a series of reforms aimed at improving policy coordination and coherence across Queensland government.<sup>4</sup> Strongly influenced by the experience of the Commonwealth, New South Wales and Victorian public sectors (see, for example, Coaldrake 1993; Selth 1993), it formalised Cabinet processes, strengthened central agencies and created new structures and arrangements in an effort to build policy capacity and ensure greater responsiveness to ministers and Cabinet (Davis 1995, pp. 26-27; Scott et al 2001, pp. 172-185). In 1991, Goss established a separate Office of Cabinet with its own Director-General. Though initially welcomed, it came to be associated with the 'Praetorian Guard' that surrounded the Premier, and was seen as an arrogant, domineering and politicised outfit that discomfited Ministers and agencies alike (see Scott et al 2001, pp. 182-183; Wanna 2003, p. 371). Agencies struggled with what they saw as the unrelenting demands of the centre while Ministers bridled at the controlling style of Premier Wayne Goss (Davis 1995, p. 144; Wanna 2003).

The Goss government lost office to a National-Liberal coalition between 1996 and 1998 (Wanna 1997), ostensibly because it was seen to be aloof, arrogant, and 'not listening' to voters (Wanna 2003). New Premier, Rob Borbidge, used the opportunity to dismantle many of Labor's innovations, including the more directive role played by the Premier's department (Scott et al 2001; Wanna 1997). The Office of Cabinet was abolished, as was the Public Sector Management Commission (PSMC), established to conduct reviews to improve the organisational efficiency and effectiveness of all Queensland public sector agencies (Selth 1993; Shand 1993). Wanna (2003, p.371) notes that few mourned the passing of central agency power. However the Coalition's lack of investment in routines and coordination systems made the government 'prone to undisciplined and sometimes eccentric, decision-making' (Glyn Davis, quoted in Menzies 2005, p. 11).

Beattie became Premier at the head of a minority Labor government in 1998. He rejected a return to Goss's highly centralised approach, opting for a more collaborative style, mediated through the Policy Division of DPC (Scott et al 2001, p. 194). Over several terms, and especially since his landslide election victories in 2001 and 2004 (Wanna and Williams 2005),

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<sup>4</sup> For original source documents describing the reform agenda see Davis 1993. For analysis and assessment see Davis 1995.

Beattie has pursued a more directive approach, centralising power and decision-making within DPC, and increasing reporting obligations on ministers (Menzies 2005, pp. 12-15).

Establishment of the Implementation Unit can be read as part of this trend (Menzies 2005, p. 13), though much remains outside his scope and influence. Its location within his own department reflects Beattie's confidence and trust in its capacity and leadership (Menzies 2005, p. 14; Scott et al 2001, p. 195).

## **The Implementation Unit**

A view of how and why the Implementation Unit was formed and developed helps in an understanding of the work it has achieved to date and its directions for the future.

### **Rationale**

The Premier's concerns about implementation resonated with ideas already under discussion within the Policy Division. From early 2003, officials had been examining ways of building upon and refining mechanisms and routines developed to ensure government was delivering on its promises. Significant work was underway on the monitoring and reporting of election and other government commitments. The Policy Division was also exploring opportunities to become more proactive and forward-looking, to create capacity beyond the constraints of the weekly Cabinet schedule.<sup>5</sup> An internal research paper reviewed trends and developments in Australian and international jurisdictions, noting that governments, particularly multi-term governments, were directing increased attention towards implementation and service delivery. Influenced by the accounts of staff returning from exchanges to the UK Strategy Unit, the Divisional Executive requested that further work be done on developing an Implementation Unit, modelled on the British Prime Minister's Delivery Unit. Officers in Policy Division's Strategic Policy Unit had also been monitoring the decision to establish an Implementation Unit within the Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. From this general search for ideas to improve monitoring and oversight came a focus on implementation.

A detailed proposal for establishing an Implementation Unit in DPC was put to Premier Beattie after the election in February 2004. It argued that current monitoring mechanisms including twice-yearly reports to Cabinet on election commitments, annual reports from ministers on progress towards priorities outlined in Charter Letters and twice-yearly reports from Chief

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<sup>5</sup> Pers. communication with DPC staff.

Executive Officer (CEO) committees, were reactive rather than proactive, and that the Policy Division lacked both personnel resources and capacity to support agencies encountering implementation problems. The proposal argued that the establishment of a dedicated unit would enable existing mechanisms for overseeing implementation to be consolidated, and create capacity to develop new and enhanced linkages with Cabinet and budget processes. By emphasising Cabinet's interest in the implementation of policy decisions, it was anticipated agencies would give more specific consideration to implementation planning during policy design and development. Ongoing monitoring and reporting was expected to encourage closer cooperation and liaison between line agencies and DPC, allowing problems or slippages to be identified earlier, resulting in fewer 'surprises' for Cabinet and greater capacity to pursue corrective and if necessary 'hands-on' strategies to get implementation back on track.

### **Role and functions**

It was proposed the new Unit would have responsibilities in four key areas.

The first, was supporting the government's agenda setting processes. The Unit would have responsibility for preparing the *Statement of Priorities* announced by the Premier at the beginning of each term. The Beattie government has used this as the key 'directional statement' of the government's policy intent. It identifies areas in which the government is seeking significant improvements as a result of an enhanced focus during the term.<sup>6</sup> The priorities shape policy development and budget allocation decisions, and provide a framework for planning and reporting processes across government. The *Priorities in Progress* report, coordinated by DPC and Treasury as a requirement of the Charter of Social and Fiscal Responsibility, provides an annual assessment of the government's performance towards achievement of its priorities.<sup>7</sup> The government's third term priorities include:

- Improving health care and strengthening services to the community
- Realising the Smart State through education, skills and innovation
- Protecting our children and enhancing community safety
- Managing urban growth and building Queensland's regions

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from Director-General of DPC, Dr Leo Keliher, to agency heads, 4 May 2004. Tabled by the Premier in Parliament, 2 September 2004.

<sup>7</sup> *Priorities in Progress* reports can be accessed from:  
<http://www.treasury.qld.gov.au/office/knowledge/docs/priorities/index.shtml>

- Protecting the environment for a sustainable future
- Growing a diverse economy and creating jobs
- Delivering responsive government<sup>8</sup>

For the Implementation Unit, the directions outlined in this and other significant documents such as the election platform, the budget and other major policy statements would provide the focus for monitoring, with the aim of ensuring early identification of potential problems or implementation obstacles.

A second area of activity for the Implementation Unit was to clarify expectations of what is to be achieved during the term at both Ministerial and agency level, and to ensure ownership and responsibility for delivery is clear. Key mechanisms for this include Ministerial Charter Letters which outline the Premier's expectations of individual ministers and their departments for each term of office, and CEO performance agreements negotiated by the Office of Public Sector Merit and Equity (OPSME) between the Premier and agency heads.

Monitoring performance and implementation was a third area of focus for the Implementation Unit's work, while reporting to Cabinet on achievements and the status of major initiatives was a fourth.

In August 2004, the Unit assumed an additional role – managing issues of personal interest to the Premier. It took responsibility for developing a ten-year strategy to guide the Premier's *Smart State* vision. Beattie has a strong personal investment in the concept of Queensland becoming a 'smart state', one where 'knowledge, creativity and innovation drive economic growth to improve the quality of life for all Queenslanders' (Queensland Government 2005). A small unit, headed by the Implementation Unit's Executive Director, was formed to develop a whole-of-government strategy informed by research and a detailed consultation process. The strategy, which includes coordinated implementation and reporting across agencies and a performance evaluation and reporting framework, was launched by the Premier in April 2005. The Unit took carriage of the *Smart State* strategy because it fitted with the skills and expertise of its staff. This also reflected the Premier's wish that key individuals he knew and trusted should be involved in its development.<sup>9</sup> A *Smart State* strategy team has been formed within

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<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the priorities, see <http://www.thepremier.qld.gov.au/priorities/index.shtm>.

<sup>9</sup> Menzies (2005, pp. 15-17) argues that Beattie runs a highly personalised administration, developing relationships of trust with individuals who are responsive to his style and methods of operation.

the Implementation Unit to oversee the implementation phase. Importantly, and in contrast to existing arrangements, the Unit would work *prospectively* – with agencies on major policy proposals to ensure Cabinet submissions would address implementation challenges. It would also work *retrospectively* – monitoring the implementation of Cabinet decisions and, if necessary, taking follow-up action to address problems or issues that may arise as policy intent is translated into practical action. The Unit would extend the reach of the Premier and his department beyond the Cabinet decision stage to continuing involvement with agencies in monitoring the implementation of Cabinet decisions (Menzies 2005, p. 13). By promoting ‘front-end’ consideration of implementation issues, it was envisaged the Unit would help develop improved implementation capacity in the Queensland public sector. It is worth noting here the parallels in the language used by Peter Shergold (2003) to describe the activities of the Commonwealth’s unit and that expressed in the Queensland proposal. DPC’s adoption of Shergold’s description of prospective and retrospective action (see Wanna 2005, p. 5) suggests that by early 2004, the Australian variant was having more of an influence on the Queensland model than the more ambitious UK Delivery Unit.

### **Formation and structure**

Queensland’s Implementation Unit was formed from existing parts of Policy Division, and without a significant injection of new resources or personnel. The former Strategic Policy, Reporting for Government and later the Policy Research units were combined, in a decision that reflected administrative convenience rather than a considered resourcing strategy (Bureaucrats A, B, C). Many of the fifteen staff who made up the initial staffing cohort brought existing functions and obligations with them. This proved problematic during the first few months of the Unit’s operations, as the group endeavoured to integrate the three previously disparate work programs. The Unit’s structure developed around these three key functions. Its mission became:

To drive the effective implementation of Government election commitments and key policy decisions by:

- Supporting Policy Division to assist agencies ensure critical implementation risks are adequately considered pre and post Cabinet;
- Strengthening the research base for policy development on complex delivery issues;

- Providing regular progress reports to the Premier and Cabinet on the implementation of Government priorities; and
- Directly overseeing the delivery and evaluation of significant projects.<sup>10</sup>

The decision to locate the Unit within Policy Division and not as a separate entity was a pragmatic one. The Premier had previously eschewed the idea of functional separation, believing it too close to the Cabinet Office model (Bureaucrat A; also see Scott et al 2001, p. 195). Moreover the Unit's work was seen as being closely integrated with the rest of Policy Division's work. Senior officials interviewed for this study report that implementation is seen as another part of the policy cycle and that accordingly, 'There is no logic in separating it from other parts of the process' (Bureaucrat A). DPC respondents see the establishment of the Unit as formalising what had for a long time been a rather ad hoc approach to implementation (Bureaucrats D; H). Embedding the Unit within Policy Division also ensured much-needed skills and expertise were retained, rather than fragmented. In a highly fluid political environment such as prevailed in Queensland over recent times, such flexibility is crucial. Policy Division has proved itself highly adaptable to the Premier's needs, through for example, its capacity to form project teams to deal with emerging issues and priorities, and to provide rapid briefing on issues across government (Menzies 2005, p. 14). However though staff had strong central agency experience and networks, none had specific implementation skills nor project management expertise like their Commonwealth counterparts (Wanna 2005). An early priority was to identify and develop the requisite skills through professional development opportunities, seminars and unit meetings.

Conscious of the legacy of distrust of central agency intervention, DPC's approach was initially cautious. Senior officials claim the department is sensitive to the dilemmas of strong central control and that, accordingly, they emphasise the need to build trusting relationships with agencies, and the need to avoid imposition, duplication and burdens on them from multiple points of contact (Bureaucrat A; E). This may help to explain why, rather than dealing directly with government agencies, Queensland's Implementation Unit works through the existing network of Portfolio Contact Officers (PCOs) in the four specialist units of Policy Division – Economic Policy, Law and Justice Policy, Social Policy and Environment and Resources Policy. This provides agencies with a single point of contact in DPC, and enables PCOs to deepen their content knowledge and expertise.

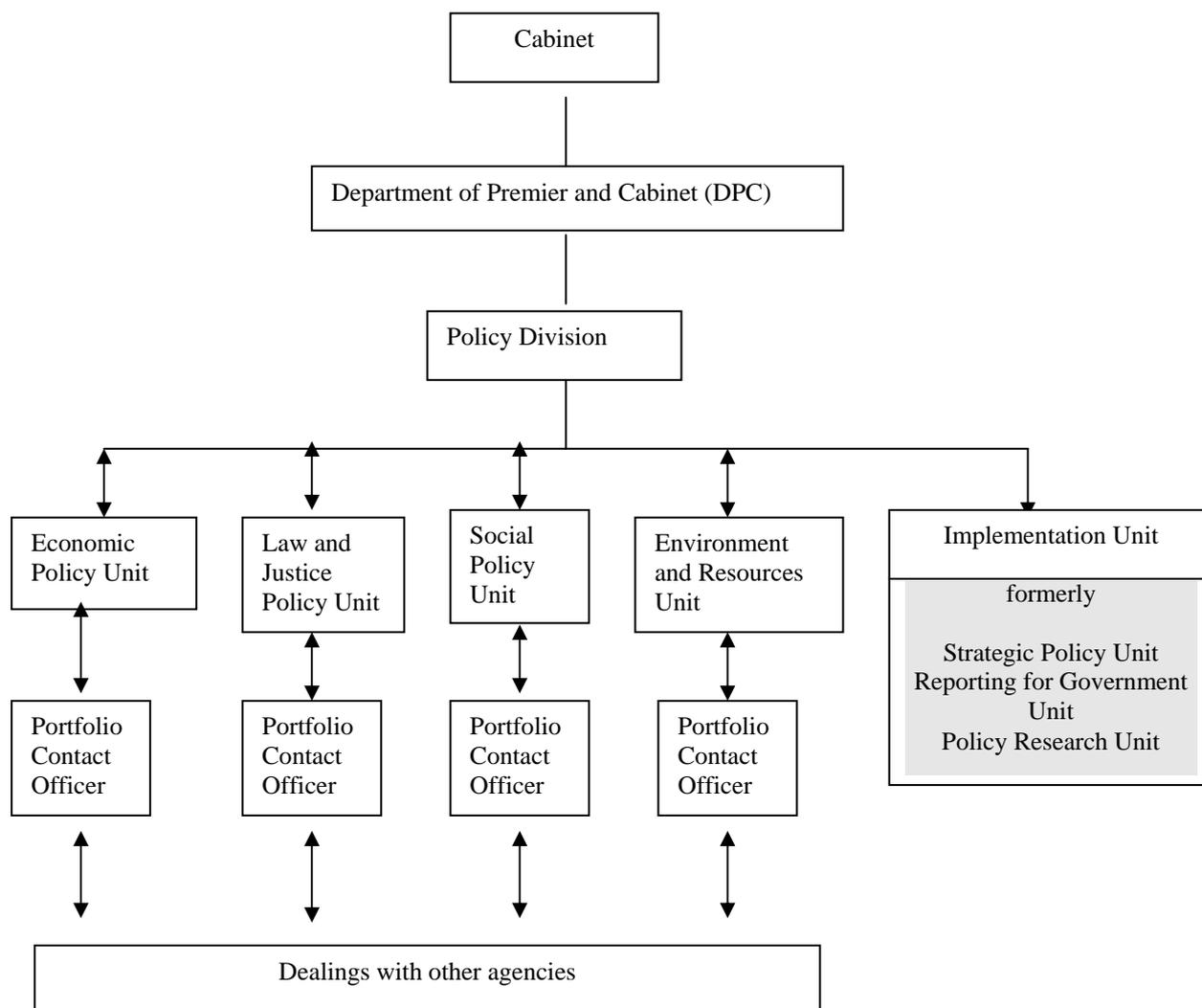
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<sup>10</sup> Implementation Unit Business Plan 2004-05.

Though motivated by a desire to avoid becoming an additional encumbrance on agencies, this is a potential vulnerability of the Queensland model. The PCO group is burdened by existing obligations to the Cabinet process. Further, staff who are relatively junior in classification have generalist policy skills rather than any deep expertise in implementation and have found themselves fire-fighting the litany of controversies that has dogged Beattie's administration in its third term. Implementation Unit staff rely on PCOs to collect information about implementation issues from agencies, and to use their knowledge and understanding of departments and their programs to identify and assess implementation risks and problems. The volume of submissions and the relatively short Cabinet timetables make it difficult for PCOs to be proactive at the 'front-end' of policy development. Much depends on the quality of information provided by agencies. Building the skills and judgment capacities of the PCO group remains a priority (Bureaucrat A), but early plans to develop a Delivery Unit style 'toolkit' of resources to support implementation planning seem to have been overtaken by events.

Figure 1 shows the structure and working relationships of the Implementation Unit.

**Figure 1 Implementation Unit structure and working relationships**



Anxious to avoid perceptions of creeping central agency interference, DPC leaders stressed that the Unit's role would not diminish the responsibility and accountability of Ministers or CEOs for implementation of portfolio-related government priorities.<sup>11</sup> Instead it would work to ensure implementation skills and capacities were developed in line with departments. In a letter to agency heads, Director-General of DPC, Dr Leo Keliher explained:

The focus of this unit will be to monitor the Government's key election and policy commitments, keep the Premier informed of progress or otherwise in meeting those commitments, and work with agencies to ensure implementation occurs.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Dr Leo Keliher to agency heads, 12 March 2004. Tabled by Premier Beattie in Queensland Parliament, 2 September 2004.

It is intended the Unit will build on and consolidate the work of a number of areas within Policy Division to focus on improving implementation. It is designed to deliver:

- An enhanced focus on outcomes and increased capacity to quantify the Government's achievements;
- Front-end consideration of implementation issues;
- Enhanced problem-solving and removal of obstacles, in conjunction with departments; and
- Timely implementation, with potential slippages being identified and rectified earlier.

More specifically, the unit will:

- Monitor and report on the implementation of all election commitments;
- Monitor and pursue the implementation of all Cabinet and Cabinet Budget Review Committee (CBRC) decisions; and
- Monitor and facilitate the implementation of key policy initiatives.

## Early achievements

Much of the Unit's first few months was spent scoping and refining its work program. Staff researched how comparable jurisdictions approached their work, exchanging ideas and information with the Commonwealth Implementation Unit and functional equivalents in other state and territory jurisdictions. But there was limited time for conceptual development or to flesh out in any detail how the Unit might operate. There was pressure to 'hit the ground running' and 'to get runs on the board quickly' (Bureaucrats B; F). Early achievements included:

- Announcement of government priorities (April 2004)
- Development and circulation of Ministerial charter letters (May 2004)
- Identification of key initiatives for inclusion in the 'Top Fifty' report to Cabinet (see below)
- Development of a schedule of reporting to Cabinet and CBRC.

Another achievement was the development of an Implementation Assessment Template to 'assist agencies in considering implementation during the policy development phase'.<sup>12</sup> The Unit was also responsible for revisions to the *Queensland Cabinet Handbook* to include the requirement for Implementation Plans in all Cabinet submissions, and to reflect the stronger emphasis on implementation in recommendations to Cabinet (*Queensland Cabinet Handbook*, Chapter 5, 5.41).

Though procedural in nature, the requirement to include implementation plans in Cabinet submissions is seen by some as having had positive effects. Agency respondents report they have received useful feedback from the Implementation Unit (via PCOs) on tightening recommendations to make clear 'who is doing what and by when' (Bureaucrat I). But others are sceptical about the extent to which the Unit has been successful in promoting greater awareness or understanding of implementation issues, suggesting the *Cabinet Handbook* changes are seen as a compliance activity (Bureaucrat L). The requirement to record an individual officer as being specifically responsible for initiatives in implementation plans has provoked some unease, but DPC officers believe it improves accountability and empowers those officers to drive change (Bureaucrat A; E).

Some respondents identify the requirement for evaluations to be included in new policy and program initiatives as evidence of a stronger 'front-end' focus on implementation over the past eighteen months (Bureaucrat D; K). The historic lack of an evaluation culture, and of a systematic process for evaluating government programs, is a significant weakness of the Queensland public sector.<sup>13</sup> A legacy of the failure to embed public sector reform initiatives, and a lack of central mechanisms to drive a focus on outcomes and performance, it is seen as having a role in recent failures. While there is much to be done to improve agency awareness and understanding of the need to focus on implementation and review, and to develop processes and incentives to develop a stronger 'connect' between policy development and implementation, some progress has been made on new policies and programs. Despite its difficulties, the Beattie government has delivered a number of significant policy initiatives during the third term. Significant among these are the *Smart State* strategy, the South-East Queensland Infrastructure plan and a Homelessness package. These whole-of-government

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<sup>12</sup> Framed as a guidance to agencies, this is available at: [http://www.premiers.qld.gov.au/About\\_the\\_department/publications/policies/Implementation\\_Plan\\_template/](http://www.premiers.qld.gov.au/About_the_department/publications/policies/Implementation_Plan_template/)

<sup>13</sup> This was a consistent theme in interview data collected for this study. It requires further examination and analysis.

initiatives are underpinned by detailed implementation plans; they also provide a forum for 'strategic conversations' to drive issue identification across government.

## From Reporting to Oversight

Reporting was the primary focus during the Unit's establishment phase, that is developing the suite of reports that would assist in monitoring implementation issues and trends. The Unit prepares three significant reports. The Cabinet milestones report monitors implementation of Cabinet decisions against milestones identified in implementation plans in Cabinet submissions. Intended as an information tool to assist agencies in keeping track of commitments, the milestones report is circulated monthly to departments through PCOs for review and updating. DPC officials report that after some initial reticence, agencies are beginning to respond positively to the milestones report. It provides a basis for dialogue and information exchange between line departments and the central agency about the status of new initiatives and programs. If agencies slip, Implementation Unit staff talk with PCOs about why progress is not being made, and to determine what intervention may be required to expedite matters. Because they focus attention on who is responsible for what and when, the milestones report is also a useful leverage point for cross-agency initiatives.

Two other reports are for Cabinet consideration. These are the election commitments report, provided twice-yearly, and the key initiatives report, known colloquially as the 'Top Fifty'. Borrowed from the Commonwealth Implementation Unit, this is a status report on high priority election commitments, Cabinet and CBRC decisions. The 'Top Fifty' issues are identified by the policy units and updated at monthly meetings between the units and the Implementation Unit. This report uses a 'traffic lights' system, modelled on the Commonwealth's approach (see Wanna 2005), to assess the level of risk of individual initiatives not being implemented, or falling behind implementation schedule. The monthly meeting maintains a focus on implementation, and is an opportunity to review the assessment of particular initiatives. The information contained in this report is used strategically to identify problems, blockages and reasons for lack of progress. It has been restructured in recent months to have a more explicit focus on risk. For initiatives assessed 'red' or 'orange', agencies are required to identify the remedial actions they will take to reduce or mitigate risk in the future. An initiative comes off the 'Top Fifty' list when DPC is confident it is firmly on track.

The view among DPC respondents interviewed for this study is that creating a focus on implementation has been a significant achievement of the Unit's first year. According to well-placed observers, regular reporting and awareness that implementation is a priority for the Premier is fostering a sense of shared commitment among Ministers that their agencies need to focus on getting delivery happening. When the first reports went to Cabinet, Ministers read them with interest. Most agreed it was a good discipline, and that the information would be useful for dialogue with their agencies about issues needing attention and action. Cabinet's focus has been somewhat distracted by the political fire-fighting imperatives of the past twelve months. It has been difficult for the Unit to obtain specific feedback on performance or expectations. The reports of the Queensland Public Hospitals Commission of Inquiry and the Health Systems review, due shortly, may provide an opportunity to canvas options for the future.

A lack of continuity in the Unit's leadership hindered progress during the early months. The foundation Executive Director, former Cabinet Secretary, Jennifer Menzies, who was integral in the Unit's creation, left DPC in December 2004. Her replacement, former Commonwealth Treasury officer, Pradeep Philip, did not arrive until April 2005, leaving the Unit without strong direction at a critical point in its development. This, together with its indirect role in dealing with agencies may explain the relative lack of recognition and understanding of the Unit's role and purpose across Queensland government. It was an uncertain time for staff, a high proportion of whom were temporary appointments, whose future roles with the Unit could not be resolved until a new Executive Director was appointed.

The change of leadership heralded a new phase for the Implementation Unit. Respondents describe the first twelve months as the establishment phase; the Unit is now in a 'consolidation' phase. The arrival of a new Executive Director has brought a change of emphasis. Reflecting Philip's Commonwealth Treasury background and experience, the language of 'risk management' now permeates the Unit's activities. As its processes mature, the Unit hopes to promote behaviour change by creating a focus on and a culture of identifying and acting on risks. Though educated in Queensland, Philip lacks the deep networks of his predecessor. However since taking on the position he has been working to improve the Unit's visibility, by meeting individually with department heads, and by developing links through new coordinating

mechanisms including the Heads of Policy forum and the Policy Officers Network.<sup>14</sup>

Unencumbered by the baggage of Queensland public service career experience, and steeped in Commonwealth government systems and processes, Philip brings a new approach, one that emphasises the linkages between the different functions of the Unit – in particular between the policy research and reporting functions.

The focus on reporting has consolidated oversight mechanisms available to the Queensland Premier and his Cabinet. This has been achieved without significant impost on agencies, though whether this is being treated by them as a compliance exercise or promoting understanding and awareness of the need to focus on implementation remains to be seen. The Unit continues to review and refine its suite of reports with the aim of improving their structure, efficiency and utility. The oversight function is evolving with experience, as the Unit and agencies settle into its rhythms and negotiate its possibilities.

## **Towards Strategic Capacity**

The Implementation Unit has been developing against a backdrop of political turmoil in Queensland. Since being returned with a 37 seat majority in February 2004 (Wanna 2004, p. 608), the government has been mired in a series of political controversies, some substantive, others reflecting the 'wicked' nature of problems confronting sub-national governments trying to deliver responsive services to a demanding and often sceptical public. Others have been storms in a teacup, fanned by the increasingly antagonistic relationship between the government and Brisbane's only locally produced newspaper, *The Courier-Mail* newspaper.<sup>15</sup> The cumulative effect has been a dramatic decline in Beattie's own and his government's support (*Australian Associated Press*, 11 September 2005; *The Australian*, 22 September 2005, 17 September 2005).

As the fortunes of his government have faltered, Beattie has scape-goated the public service (*The Australian* 21 September 2005), blaming 'unacceptable failures' in the state bureaucracy for his government's troubles in its third term (Cole 2005). In June 2005 he complained that the poor performance of the Queensland public service was putting the future of his government at

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<sup>14</sup> This comprises all heads of policy in Queensland government departments and agencies. Established in early 2005, it meets six-monthly. The Policy Officers network comprises the next level of policy staff

<sup>15</sup> The tendency for *The Courier-Mail* to style itself as the state's unofficial Opposition has contributed to its poor relationship with the Beattie government. The Premier has accused the newspaper of running a campaign against the government over the hospitals crisis, noting that 'some sections of the media have not been prepared to report this [the hospitals issue] accurately, and accusing journalists of 'disgraceful and lazy' reporting (see, for example, *ABC News*, 22 September 2005; *The Courier-Mail*, 22 September 2005).

risk. He foreshadowed an overhaul of some departments, warning senior bureaucrats he expected them to 'lift their game' (Cole 2005).<sup>16</sup> Walker (2005) argues the problems of Queensland's public sector are systemic – attributable to a loss of professional skills and competence, a failure to measure the quality of outcomes, and a developing reputation as 'an employer of last resort'. Though he retains a significant parliamentary majority, the crises and two recent by-election losses have shaken the government's confidence.<sup>17</sup> In each situation the Premier has vowed to 'fix' the problems that have been identified, creating additional significant demands for monitoring and oversight and, in the case of the health system, reforms due to be announced in late September 2005. These situations have also prompted a search for levers to help prevent similar problems in the future.

The difficulties of the third term have had inevitable consequences for Policy Division, including staff of the Implementation Unit. In addition to their normal work, staff are involved in a variety of crisis management activities. With their knowledge and experience of agencies and issues, and their less direct links to the Cabinet process, Implementation Unit staff provide additional organisational capacity, highlighting the benefits but also the potential risks of locating the Unit within Policy Division. In August 2005, head of Policy Division, Deputy Director-General, Uschi Schreiber, was appointed Director-General of the troubled Queensland Health. A strong proponent of the Implementation Unit, and well trusted by the Premier, her departure may have implications for the future directions of the Unit.

Promoting awareness of implementation risks and challenges will require the Unit develop a higher profile than has thus far been the case. DPC leaders are conscious that it is not well recognised and that its role is not well understood outside the central agencies. Building its profile and developing its education, outreach and capacity-building activities are important priorities for the consolidation phase. This will require closer relationships with agencies and with Treasury, now part of the Premier's portfolio following a Cabinet reshuffle in July 2005. The Unit is working to better integrate its policy research and reporting functions. Staff believe there is potential for research to promote a better understanding of the underlying causes of problems or risks, and hence to improve the effectiveness of policy interventions. As with its oversight functions, the Unit's approach will be developmental and iterative. Beattie's hands-off style and the DPC leadership's support have enabled it to do and try different things. In the

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<sup>16</sup> In July 2005, the two most senior executives of Queensland Health were sacked along with their Minister.

<sup>17</sup> In August 2005 the government lost the two formerly safe seats of Redcliffe and Chatsworth in by-elections with swings against it of 8 and 14 per cent respectively (*The Australian*, 22 August 2005).

unique context of the Queensland public sector, the Unit has no option but to experiment and evolve arrangements that suit and will be accepted across government. As DPC officials note:

There is no handbook for doing this...We're working with the stock we have. We're doing what we can (Bureaucrat E).

We really are forging new ground (Bureaucrat A).

One possible future direction intended to provide strategic capacity is to broaden the Unit's remit towards an emphasis on programmatic implementation and review. An option might be, for example, to dedicate Implementation Unit staff, in collaboration with agencies, to examine more closely issues or risks identified through regular reporting processes. An 'Assessment Review' of the Child Safety department's progress with implementing the 'blueprint' for reform of Queensland's child protection system, by a team of officials from Policy Division, Treasury and the Department of Child Safety in mid-2005, is an exemplar of how this might develop. A pre-emptive review in anticipation of the requirement to report to the Crime and Misconduct Commission in January 2006, its aim was to evaluate progress towards implementing the recommendations, and to highlight matters requiring elevation, or central agency action to address blockages or delays. If the Unit receives the Premier's imprimatur to go down this path, a key challenge will be to ensure reviews are conducted in ways that build capacity and enlist agency support.

Respondents to this study, including from line agencies, are in broad agreement about the need for strong central agency leadership and direction to build a sustained focus on implementation and risk management across the Queensland public sector. As it evolves beyond oversight towards a more strategic focus, the Implementation Unit has a potentially important role to play in this agenda.

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