

PEOPLE POWERED EDUCATION

How slice teams could transform
the Department for Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A moment of opportunity

This paper sets out a bold new approach to how education policy is made, rooted in shared power, systems thinking and democratic participation. It reimagines the policy environment by replacing top-down decision-making with representative, participatory, evidence-informed teams known as **slice teams**. Each team brings together a diverse mix of people with lived, professional and civic experience of a policy area – including those who work in it, are affected by it, research it or help deliver it.

It is designed to ensure that people throughout the education system – the young people, families and professionals whose lives are most shaped by education policy – are meaningfully involved in how decisions are made, rather than power being confined to a small, unrepresentative group at the centre. Drawing together ideas from systems thinking, implementation science, improvement science and deliberative democracy, it offers a practical framework for effective governance in a complex, dynamic, interconnected system.

For a government serious about education, this is a moment of real opportunity. Trust in top-down reform is low. The system faces deep, interlocking challenges – a Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system in crisis, persistent attainment gaps, falling attendance, rising mental health needs, and strains on teacher recruitment and retention. Reforms imposed from Whitehall too often fail to improve outcomes on the ground. Slice politics offers a way to make reform stick: to involve the people who deliver and experience education not as a consultation exercise, but as contributors to how decisions are made.

An operating system for a complex world

The way in which we make education policy is no longer fit for purpose. Decisions are concentrated at the centre, incentives reward short-term thinking, and policymaking is too often shaped by groupthink, churn and crisis management. The result is “initiative-itis” among the teaching profession and a growing sense that policy is done to schools rather than with them.

Slice politics responds to this reality by creating the conditions for ongoing dialogue, data sharing, problem-solving and mutual learning through three interconnected structures:

- **A horizontal slice team** of senior policy leads with substantial experience and deep understanding of particular areas of education – such as SEND, literacy and numeracy, safeguarding or early years – who coordinate strategy and ensure coherence across the system. Instead of relying on a single Secretary of State and a small group of advisers, leadership is shared across this team.
- **A vertical slice team** supporting each policy lead, comprising people with a range of lived, professional and civic experience to shape policy from the ground up.

- **A lateral slice team** connecting each member of a vertical slice team to people in similar roles in different parts of the country, ensuring geographical diversity and a steady flow of locally grounded insight into departmental decision-making.

These teams would operate in structured cycles: identifying challenges, co-creating responses, testing them in real-world settings and refining approaches based on a combination of data and ongoing dialogue. Each horizontal slice team would be appointed by – and report to – the Secretary of State, and all teams would be supported by a shared infrastructure for training, logistics and accountability.

The logic is simple – and well evidenced. Across sectors such as health and education, research shows that change driven by representative teams is around five times more likely to take hold and endure than reform imposed from the top. Slice teams bring this proven logic into the heart of national education policymaking.

Why education is the right place to start

Education is among the best-suited areas of public policy for this approach. It is inherently relational and place-based; it depends on a large, skilled and committed professional workforce; it has a strong evidence ecosystem; and it already has rich participatory traditions, from pupil voice and school councils to governing bodies and trust structures. By embedding lived experience alongside professional and research expertise, slice teams ensure that policies are shaped not only by what is politically expedient, but by what is workable, fair, sustainable – and in the interests of current and future generations of children and young people.

For a government wanting to demonstrate that it can govern differently – and implement reforms that last beyond a single ministerial tenure – slice politics offers:

- **Distinctiveness:** a genuinely new operating model for a government department, unlike the conventional machinery of Whitehall.
- **Credibility:** a practical, intuitive model for effective governance that demonstrates seriousness about delivery and responsibility.
- **Engagement:** a way to mobilise the profession, families and young people as active contributors rather than passive recipients of reform.
- **Durability:** a pathway to improved outcomes that is tested, owned, adapted and embedded across the system, rather than imposed and later reversed.

What it would look like at the Department for Education

Under the proposed model, the Department for Education would be organised around slice teams rooted in lived, professional and civic experience from across England. Teams would work alongside civil servants and be accountable to the Secretary of State and Parliament

through clear, transparent protocols that strengthen, rather than bypass, democratic accountability. Most slice team members would be based outside London, helping to rebalance the geography of power, supported by a national Slice Office providing coordination, quality assurance and shared learning. This approach would establish a department that tests ideas, learns from experience and governs differently – a model that could, in time, be extended to other government departments.

A different kind of devolution

Slice politics also offers a fresh answer to one of the central questions in British politics: how power should be devolved. Much of the current devolution agenda distributes power geographically, to regions and local authorities – which can leave the direction of education policy, and the entitlements and protections children rely on, to vary considerably from place to place and to shift with changes in local political control.

Slice politics devolves power along a different axis. The model is still spread across the country – its lateral slice teams are geographically representative by design – but power is distributed according to knowledge, experience and stake, rather than handed to whoever controls a particular area. Decisions sit with the people who understand a challenge most deeply and live with its consequences most directly. Crucially, it does so while preserving national democratic accountability and oversight, keeping the system coherent and children’s entitlements consistent even as decisions are brought closer to those they affect.

About this green paper

This paper sets out a practical and hopeful vision for how slice teams could transform the way in which the Department for Education addresses complex challenges, making policymaking more inclusive, effective and responsive. It also confronts key risks such as bureaucratic friction, representativeness and the potential for capture, and sets out design-based safeguards to mitigate them.

It is written for policymakers, civil servants and ministers who want to turn ambition into durable reform; for school and college leaders, teachers, researchers and system leaders interested in more effective, participatory forms of decision-making; and for parents, carers, young people and citizens who believe education policy should be made with people, not done to them. It invites policymakers – and anyone committed to improving educational and life outcomes for current and future generations of children and young people – to pioneer a model of governance equal to the scale of the challenges we face.

1. Slice politics in a nutshell

At its core, slice politics replaces top-down policymaking with representative slice teams that bring together people with lived, professional and civic experience to co-create and test solutions to the most pressing challenges in education.

Each team brings together people with direct experience of the issue at hand, including frontline practitioners, researchers, policymakers, learners and their families. These teams work in structured, iterative cycles: identifying problems, designing responses, testing in real-world settings, and feeding insights back into national policy – not as occasional ‘listening exercises’, but as a permanent, embedded feature of how the department works.

The term ‘slice team’ is adapted from the idea of a ‘vertical slice’, a concept from systems engineering and software development used to describe a cross-section of a system, including representatives from every layer – from end-user to back-end infrastructure. This approach ensures that changes to complex systems are planned, implemented and evaluated through the lens of real-world experience, rather than remotely.

In recent years, the use of slice teams has spread to other fields, such as healthcare, education and business, where diverse, cross-functional teams have consistently proven more effective than siloed approaches at tackling complex problems.

For example, in healthcare, research suggests that it takes an average of 17 years for a proven clinical innovation to achieve just 14% uptake across the system as a whole.¹ In practical terms, this means that if you’re admitted to hospital, there’s a surprisingly high chance that you will receive suboptimal treatment – even though the evidence exists that better options are available.

In contrast, when change is driven by dedicated, representative teams using the tried-and-tested tools of implementation science, success rates rise dramatically. Multiple studies – across education, mental health, and social care – suggest that around 80% of initiatives using this kind of approach achieve effective, sustained implementation within three years (see Figure 1).²

¹ Morris, Z.S., Wooding, S. & Grant, J. (2011). The answer is 17 years. What is the question? Understanding time lags in translational research. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 104, 510–520; Mosteller, F. (1981). Innovation and evaluation. *Science*, 211, 881–886; Balas, E.A. & Boren, S.A. (2000). Managing clinical knowledge for health care improvement. *Yearbook of Medical Informatics*. Schattauer, Stuttgart, 65–70; Grant, J., Green, L. & Mason, B. (2003). Basic research and health: a reassessment of the scientific basis for the support of biomedical science. *Research Evaluation*, 12, 217–224; Fixsen, D., Blase, K. & Van Dyke, M. (2019). *Implementation Practice and Science*. Active Implementation Research Network. Chapel Hill, NC.

² Fixsen, D., Blase, K. & Van Dyke, M. (2019). *Implementation Practice and Science*. Active Implementation Research Network. Chapel Hill, NC. Brunk, M. A., et al. (2014). Defining and evaluating fidelity at the program level: A preliminary investigation. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, 222, 22–29. Forgatch, M. S., & DeGarmo, D. S. (2011). Sustaining Fidelity Following the Nationwide PMTO Implementation in

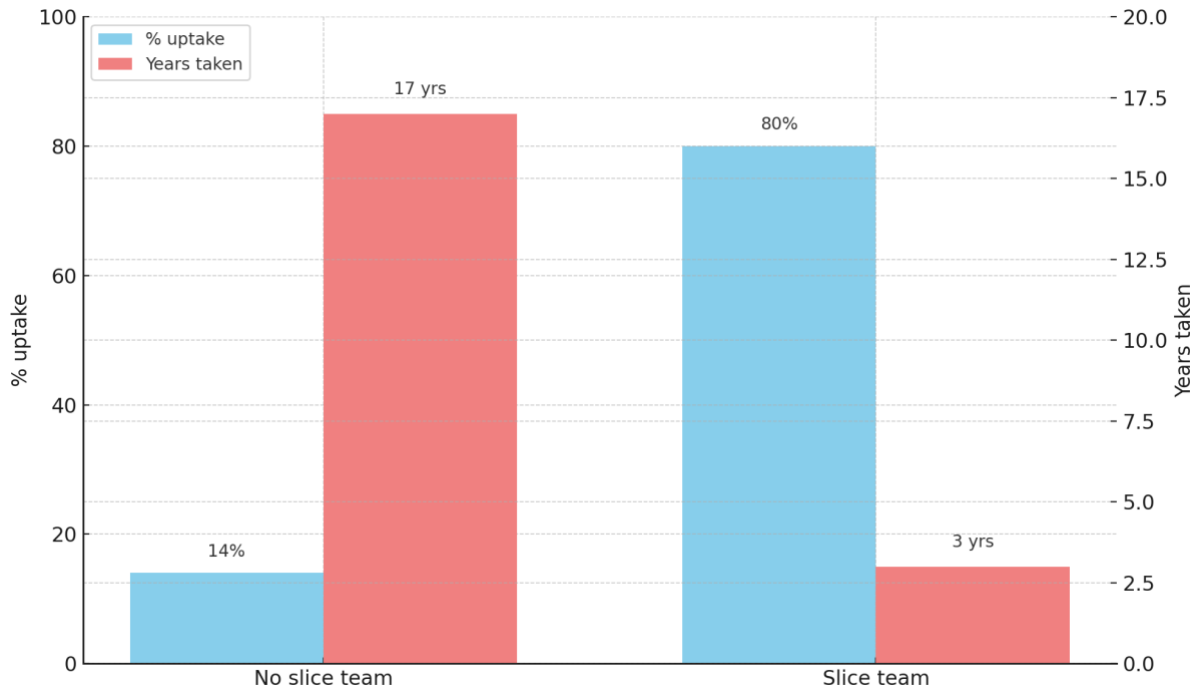


Figure 1. The impact of slice teams: uptake vs time (Fixsen, et al, 2019).

Slice politics brings this logic to the heart of government: scaling up good ideas, cutting waste, and closing the gap between what we know and what we do. It is both participatory, enabling people to co-create policy through structured collaboration, and representative, ensuring that teams reflect the diversity of lived, professional and civic experience across the country. It is evidence-informed, adaptive, and designed to meet the challenges of a complex and rapidly changing world.

This paper outlines how slice politics could be introduced and piloted at the Department for Education, offering a distinctive and credible model for a more inclusive, effective approach to government – starting in education, and capable of being extended further.

Norway. *Prevention Science*, 12(3). Ryan Jackson, K., et al. (2018). *Accomplishing effective and durable change to support improved student outcomes*. National Implementation Research Network, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Saldana, L., & Chamberlain, P. (2012). Supporting Implementation: The Role of Community Development Teams to Build Infrastructure. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 50(3-4).

2. A moment of opportunity

Education policy in England is made against a backdrop of deep reform fatigue and systemic volatility. Trust in top-down reform is low. The pace of change, driven by technological disruption, economic uncertainty, widening need and rising expectations, outstrips the capacity of our policymaking systems to respond.

The challenges facing education are interconnected and resistant to simple fixes. A SEND system under acute strain, falling school attendance, persistent attainment gaps, rising mental health needs among children and young people, and pressure on teacher recruitment and retention are not separate problems to be solved in isolation. They are symptoms of a complex system, shaped by factors well beyond the school gates – poverty, housing, health and family circumstances. A centralised, top-down model of policymaking is no match for the speed, scale and interconnected nature of these challenges. Policy is frequently reactive, short-term, and created remotely from those who experience its effects. In this context, a radical new approach could do more than improve individual policies – it could reshape how we make decisions about education as a society.

In an era of complex, system-wide challenges, no department can credibly run a system as large and intricate as education on the experience or authority of a single Secretary of State, or even a small group of advisers. There is an increasing need for the department to assemble and mobilise a broad base of expertise: people with the experience, judgement and practical knowledge required to make good decisions under real-world conditions.

This means building governing capacity openly and transparently, drawing on a broad range of expertise: former ministers and senior civil servants, leaders of schools, trusts, colleges and local government, practitioners, researchers, and people with lived experience of the system – including learners and families themselves. Crucially, such a coalition should not be confined to Whitehall insiders. Its legitimacy comes from capability, diversity of perspective, and transparency about how decisions are made.

Across health, education and local government – and throughout the world, including in the Global South – the quiet rise of participatory methods suggests a growing appetite for more inclusive, deliberative, consultative ways of working. But people want more than to be consulted. They want a meaningful say in decisions that affect their lives – and to see decisions shaped by people with real-world experience of the issues at hand.

If education policy is truly to serve everyone it affects – children, families and the workforce – it must find ways to include the full diversity of that community, across lines of class, geography, role and circumstance, in how decisions are made.

Slice politics is a practical proposal to meet this moment. It offers a way to combine ambition with governing seriousness. It embeds participatory, evidence-informed decision-making into the everyday work of the department, while drawing on a broad coalition of lived, professional and civic expertise. It would give a reforming government:

- **Distinctiveness** – a radical yet intuitive operating model unlike the conventional machinery of Whitehall.
- **Credibility** – a ready-made model for effective, deliverable governance.
- **Engagement** – a way to energise the profession, families and young people as active contributors.
- **Durability** – a model that makes reform stick, rather than be reversed with each change of minister.

This paper sets out how slice teams could help the Department for Education meet the scale of the challenges ahead by assembling the structures, capabilities and expertise that good governance requires. It is offered as a stimulus for discussion and an invitation to reimagine what a government department could look like in an era that demands better answers.

2.1. A different kind of devolution

Slice politics also speaks to one of the defining questions in British politics today: how power should be devolved. Much of the current devolution agenda seeks to push decisions outwards and downwards, to regions and local authorities. The instinct to move power closer to communities is a sound one – but devolving by geography alone carries a risk: it can make the direction of education policy, and the entitlements and protections children are able to count on, contingent on who holds power in a particular place at a particular time, opening the door to significant variation and abrupt change from one area to the next.

Slice politics offers a complementary, and in some respects more durable, model of devolution. It, too, reaches across the country – its lateral slice teams are geographically representative by design – but rather than vesting authority in whoever controls a region, it distributes power according to knowledge, experience and stake, placing decisions in the hands of the people who understand each challenge most deeply and feel its effects most directly. It retains national democratic accountability to safeguard coherence and protect the entitlements that every child should be able to rely on, wherever they live, and so brings decisions closer to the people they affect without fragmenting the standards and protections that bind the system together.

3. The problem with business-as-usual policymaking

Modern policymaking systems were not built for the challenges we face today. They evolved in simpler times, structured around binary choices, ministerial authority, and the idea that a single leader, department or unit could hold the answers. In a complex, interdependent system shaped by deep social and economic pressures, this model is increasingly out of step with reality.

In highly centralised systems, decisions are too often made behind closed doors by small groups of insiders. When consultation does occur, it is frequently shallow or performative – a tick-box ‘listening exercise’ rather than a serious attempt to share power with those affected. Ministers and civil servants operate under intense pressure to deliver short-term results, manage risk and respond to the news cycle. The result is a system that often struggles to think or act beyond the next headline.

Many policy failures can be traced back to a familiar set of structural weaknesses:

- **Groupthink** – where challenge is quietly discouraged and consensus rewarded.
- **The myth of the heroic leader** – the belief that complex problems can be solved by a small number of exceptional individuals.
- **Polarisation** – where point-scoring trumps problem-solving, and disagreement becomes performative rather than productive.
- **Disconnect** – between those in power and the lived experience of the people and communities affected by decisions.

Over time, these dynamics have eroded trust and institutional effectiveness. Promising ideas are delayed, diluted or abandoned due to political calculation or bureaucratic inertia. Frontline insight is marginalised, the workforce becomes disillusioned, and the people most affected by policy decisions – teachers, families and learners – are rarely involved in shaping them.

It’s not for want of trying. Initiatives such as citizens’ assemblies, participatory budgeting and What Works Centres have demonstrated the potential of more inclusive and evidence-informed approaches. However, these efforts have typically remained peripheral to the core machinery of government. Too often they are time-limited, advisory, or symbolic – producing thoughtful recommendations that are later side-lined or quietly shelved due to political expediency.

For any government seeking to govern differently, this presents a deeper challenge than policy design alone. Complex issues such as SEND, school improvement, attendance, and the transition to a more inclusive system cannot be addressed through reactive policymaking or short electoral cycles. They require governance models that are ongoing, participatory and capable of learning over time.

To meet the scale of the challenges ahead, we need to reimagine not only what decisions are made, but how they are made – moving beyond business-as-usual policymaking towards systems that are more inclusive, adaptive and grounded in real-world experience.

4. What is slice politics?

At the heart of slice politics is a simple but powerful idea: that small, diverse, focused teams, drawn from all corners of the system, can tackle complex problems far more effectively than traditional structures rooted in top-down decision-making.

Rather than concentrating authority in a single office, leader or unit, slice politics distributes responsibility across teams that combine lived experience, professional expertise and civic insight. In doing so, it provides a practical way of assembling and coordinating a broad base of expertise around shared challenges, without reverting to hierarchy or closed decision-making.

4.1. Origins and early applications

The concept draws on systems thinking, implementation science and improvement science, and it has already proven effective in other fields such as health and education.

An illustrative example comes from Cincinnati, USA, where the Children’s Hospital formed a cross-functional team to tackle the high rate of emergency admissions due to asthma.³ Alongside clinical specialists, this team included school nurses, pharmacists, housing officers and legal advisors, as well as asthma patients and their families.

Together, they identified and removed real-world barriers: providing children with inhalers for multiple homes, delivering medication to families without transport, addressing poor housing conditions, and offering legal aid to challenge negligent landlords. This led to a sustained reduction in hospital admissions of more than 50%, alongside dramatic improvements in school attendance, workplace participation and long-term cost savings. These gains were achieved not through the development of new treatments, but through inclusive, coordinated action to tackle barriers at their roots and scale up effective practice.

The same core principles are increasingly being used in schools, where slice teams are used to tackle complex challenges like mental health and wellbeing, anti-racism and learner effectiveness. These teams bring together teachers, leaders, support staff, parents and carers, and learners themselves – each bringing unique perspectives and working together to design, test and scale up effective practices over time.

³ Center for the Study of Social Policy (2016). Asthma Improvement Collaborative: Friends of evidence case study, DC. McCarthy, D. & Cohen, A. (2013). The Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center’s Asthma Improvement Collaborative: Enhancing Quality and Coordination of Care. The Commonwealth Fund; Kerckmar, C. M., Beck, A. F., Sauers-Ford, H. et al. (2017). Association of an Asthma Improvement Collaborative With Health Care Utilization in Medicaid-Insured Pediatric Patients in an Urban Community. *JAMA Pediatrics*. 171(11), 1072–80; Parikh, K., Hall, M., Mittal, V. et al. (2015). Comparative Effectiveness of Dexamethasone versus Prednisone in Children Hospitalized with Asthma. *J Pediatr*. 167(3), 639–44.

For example, at Highlands Primary School in Essex, slice teams are a cornerstone of school improvement. Recently, a slice team was assembled to review the school's behaviour policy in line with its rights-respecting values. During the discussion, a child in Year 3 pointed out something that the adults had missed – that supply teachers often don't understand what it means to be part of a rights-respecting school, leading to confusion and mixed messages. Her solution – a short welcome guide for visiting staff – was simple, low-cost and effective.

In these examples, we can see how slice teams can be incredibly efficient at revealing blind spots, by empowering those closest to the issue to shape change.⁴ The lessons from education and healthcare are clear: when people from across a system work together on a shared challenge – testing, implementing and evaluating new ideas – change becomes more impactful and sustainable.

4.2. How slice teams work: vertically, horizontally and laterally

In a slice politics model, each major area of public life – such as education, health, climate, or transport – would be overseen by a horizontal slice team. This team brings together people with deep experience in policy, research and frontline practice, each leading on a defined domain. Crucially, these are not generalists expected to know everything. They are policy leads, whose role is to coordinate expertise, identify trade-offs and ensure coherence in their area of interest.

To ensure that decisions are grounded in lived experience, each policy lead would be supported by a vertical slice team (VST), a diverse group of people with direct, on-the-ground experience of how the system works. For example, in the Department for Education, the policy lead for SEND might work with a VST comprising a trust leader, headteacher, senior leader, SEND coordinator, classroom teacher, parent/carer, a youth representative, and so on.

In turn, each VST member would be connected to a lateral slice team – a network of people in similar roles across different parts of the country, ensuring geographical representation and enabling feedback from diverse local contexts.

Taken together, this triple structure – horizontal for breadth and coordination, vertical for depth and experience, and lateral for reach and diversity – would ensure that policies are shaped by those with expertise, informed by those closest to the work, shared across networks, and continually refined over time.

The same model can be applied across government. In areas such as housing, mental health or climate policy, slice teams would bring together people with deep, relevant expertise and lived experience, connected through vertical and lateral networks that keep decision-making grounded, adaptive and accountable.

⁴ Rethinking Education (2025) *"You can't afford not to!" Headteacher Kulvarn Atwal on the power of slice teams [YouTube video]*. 21 June. Available at: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=dezQQjqcc90>.

A more detailed illustration of how this model would operate in practice is set out in Section 7.2, *Worked example: Slice politics at the Department for Education*.

4.3. What makes slice politics different?

Slice politics represents a structural shift in how decisions are made. It moves participation upstream, making power-sharing and collaborative design a standard feature of how government operates.

Unlike traditional consultation exercises, which are often time-limited and reactive, slice teams are permanent, embedded, and designed to lead. They work in real time to identify issues, design responses and test solutions with the people most affected. Crucially, the model can be applied at scale. Multiple slice teams could operate in parallel across a department – and, in time, across departments – supported by shared rhythms, open reporting, and coordination through a central Slice Office. This would keep the system aligned and adaptable, without losing local insight or autonomy.

In short, slice politics offers a way to make government more capable, more connected and more legitimate, by placing real-world expertise, diverse perspectives and collective responsibility at the heart of how decisions are made.

5. Why education is the right place to start

Of all areas of public policy, education is among the best suited to a slice politics approach – both in principle and in practice. Education is inherently relational and place-based. It depends on a large, skilled and committed professional workforce. It has a rich and maturing evidence ecosystem, from the Education Endowment Foundation to the wider What Works movement. And it already has deep participatory traditions – pupil voice, school councils, governing bodies, parent engagement and collaborative improvement across trusts and partnerships. Slice politics takes these instincts and elevates them to the level of national policymaking. It also reflects principles of good governance that apply with particular force to education:

- **Interdependence and systems thinking:** recognising that educational outcomes are shaped by health, housing, poverty and family circumstances – and designing decision-making structures that reflect this reality, rather than fragmenting responsibility across silos.
- **The long view:** creating governance processes that explicitly weigh long-term consequences for children and future generations, rather than privileging short-term political gain.
- **Decision-making close to the ground:** ensuring that decisions are shaped by those most affected by them, drawing on lived experience, local knowledge and frontline insight.
- **Plural knowledge, not narrow expertise:** valuing many forms of understanding – lived, professional, cultural and scientific – and resisting the idea that any single group has a monopoly on truth or solutions.
- **Collective responsibility over heroic leadership:** rejecting the myth that complex problems can be solved by exceptional individuals alone, and instead building shared, cooperative capacity to govern well.
- **Improvement through learning and restraint:** treating policy as something that must be tested, adapted and refined within real-world limits, rather than imposed at scale without feedback or accountability.

Slice politics builds directly on a long-standing commitment to participatory and deliberative practice – from citizens’ assemblies and participatory budgeting to, in education, pupil voice, lesson study and improvement collaboratives. These approaches are expressions of a deep belief in shared power, plural knowledge and democratic accountability. Slice politics extends this tradition into a coherent, system-wide approach to governing education, capable of responding to the complex, interdependent challenges of the 21st century.

5.1. Rebuilding trust in education policymaking

At a time when trust in top-down reform is low and reform fatigue is widespread, slice politics offers more than a hopeful vision. It is a practical response to one of the central challenges facing the Department for Education: how to make reform ambitious, durable and trusted, without watering it down or seeing it reversed.

For a workforce that often feels reform is done to it rather than with it, slice politics offers a meaningful role in shaping decisions. For families and young people who feel ignored or excluded, it offers genuine agency. And for a public unsure whether the system can be trusted to take big decisions well, it provides a clear answer: by demonstrating, in practice, how decisions are made, with whom, and on what basis.

Slice politics is a governing approach that would enable a government to turn reform ambition into practical authority – and to rebuild trust by doing education policy better.

6. What slice politics offers a reforming government

Adopting slice politics at the Department for Education would not only improve the quality of decisions – it would offer a government a distinctive, credible and durable approach to reform. Slice politics provides a coherent framework: a different model of governance, grounded in participation, evidence and shared responsibility, and tested openly. It strengthens the case for reform in several distinct but reinforcing ways – from how it differentiates the approach, to how it builds credibility, engagement and durability. The sections that follow explore these in turn.

6.1. A genuinely different approach to reform

Most education reform debates are about what to change. Slice politics is about how change is made. It replaces top-down command with participation, churn with continuity, and closed decision-making with shared problem-solving.

While conventional reform focuses on controlling the message or concentrating authority, slice politics opens up the process itself. It prioritises collective leadership over top-down command, and learning-by-doing over performative certainty. This is a model that breaks with tradition in both content and character, aligning closely with a commitment to cooperation, transparency and democratic participation.

6.2. Demonstrating serious reform capacity

The public and the profession want more than critique or aspiration – they want reassurance that change can be delivered. Slice politics provides a concrete framework for how decisions would be made, and how complex problems would be addressed in practice.

Rather than relying on a small circle of ministers and advisers operating behind closed doors, slice politics centres collective governing capacity. It brings together people with lived experience, professional expertise and institutional knowledge to work alongside policymakers in real-world conditions. This shows a department preparing seriously to deliver: not by claiming to have all the answers, but by building structures that can learn, adapt and act responsibly under pressure.

6.3. Engaging the profession and the public

This approach departs clearly from policy-as-usual – and that is what makes it so valuable. Slice politics responds to a growing desire for decision-making that is participatory, honest and

grounded in everyday experience. It offers a clear break from the sense that decisions are made elsewhere, by others, and without meaningful input.

Slice politics offers a way to:

- **Re-engage a workforce** that too often feels reform is imposed without its insight or consent.
- **Give families and young people agency** in the decisions that shape their education, rather than treating them as passive recipients.
- **Mobilise the wider sector** – leaders, researchers and practitioners – as active contributors to policy development throughout the cycle, not just consultees at moments of crisis.
- **Demonstrate** that something genuinely different and credible is on offer.

6.4. Building durable reform

Slice politics should not be presented as a leap of faith. There is ample scope to pilot, publicise and build trust in the approach before scaling it.

The department could establish a small number of slice teams in high-salience areas such as SEND, attendance, child mental health, and teacher recruitment and retention. These teams would bring together practitioners, researchers, families and learners to co-design and test policy approaches in the open, sharing both process and learning publicly. This would:

- Differentiate the approach from conventional, top-down reform.
- Provide opportunities to trial and refine the model.
- Show, in practical terms, how slice politics works.
- Build confidence that reform is being designed to last – rooted in practice rather than promise.

It also opens up opportunities for local experimentation, where schools, trusts and local authorities work with the department in a slice model to address pressing local challenges – making reform feel modern, inclusive and grounded in the realities of different communities.

6.5. A bold story for a new era of education policy

We are in a moment where trust is fragile, attention is scarce and reform fatigue is widespread. Reason and evidence still matter, but they are no longer sufficient on their own. People are looking for approaches that feel credible, hopeful and fundamentally different from what has gone before.

Slice politics offers such a story. It is a commitment to governing in a different way: openly, collaboratively and with humility about complexity. In a volatile landscape, where appetite for change is growing, slice politics would give a reforming government a distinctive and resonant approach – one grounded in participation, responsibility and collective decision-making.

7. What slice politics would look like at the Department for Education

Slice politics offers a practical and principled model for running the Department for Education in a way that is inclusive, adaptive and grounded in lived experience – while remaining fully accountable to democratic institutions.

7.1. A new architecture of decision-making

Under a slice politics model, each major area of education policy – including SEND, literacy and numeracy, safeguarding, early years, assessment, behaviour and attendance, and post-16 – would be supported by a network of slice teams. These are not advisory panels or occasional consultations. They are structured teams with a clear remit to co-design, test and refine policy in real-world conditions. Each slice team would:

- Operate as a semi-autonomous unit, with appropriate funding, staffing and facilitation.
- Work in partnership with the Secretary of State, who retains democratic accountability and acts as a link to Parliament.
- Be accountable through transparent reporting, clear goals and peer review.

Rather than concentrating authority in a single office or individual, slice teams would distribute responsibility while remaining aligned with elected leadership and agreed policy goals. This would allow decisions to be informed by those closest to the issues, without weakening ministerial responsibility.

Slice politics would not replace core constitutional functions. The Treasury would continue to set overall budgets, and key spending decisions would remain the responsibility of ministers. But slice politics would change how those decisions are made and tested.

By bringing together people with deep insight into how money is actually spent on the ground – and where it fails to deliver value or fairness for children – slice teams can help ensure that education funding is used more effectively, more fairly and with greater awareness of long-term outcomes.

7.2. Worked example: Slice politics at the Department for Education

As set out in Section 4.2, slice politics operates through three interconnected types of team: horizontal, vertical and lateral. This section explores how that structure could work in practice, using the Department for Education as the worked example. Figure 2 presents a schematic of the model.

SLICE POLITICS AT THE DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION

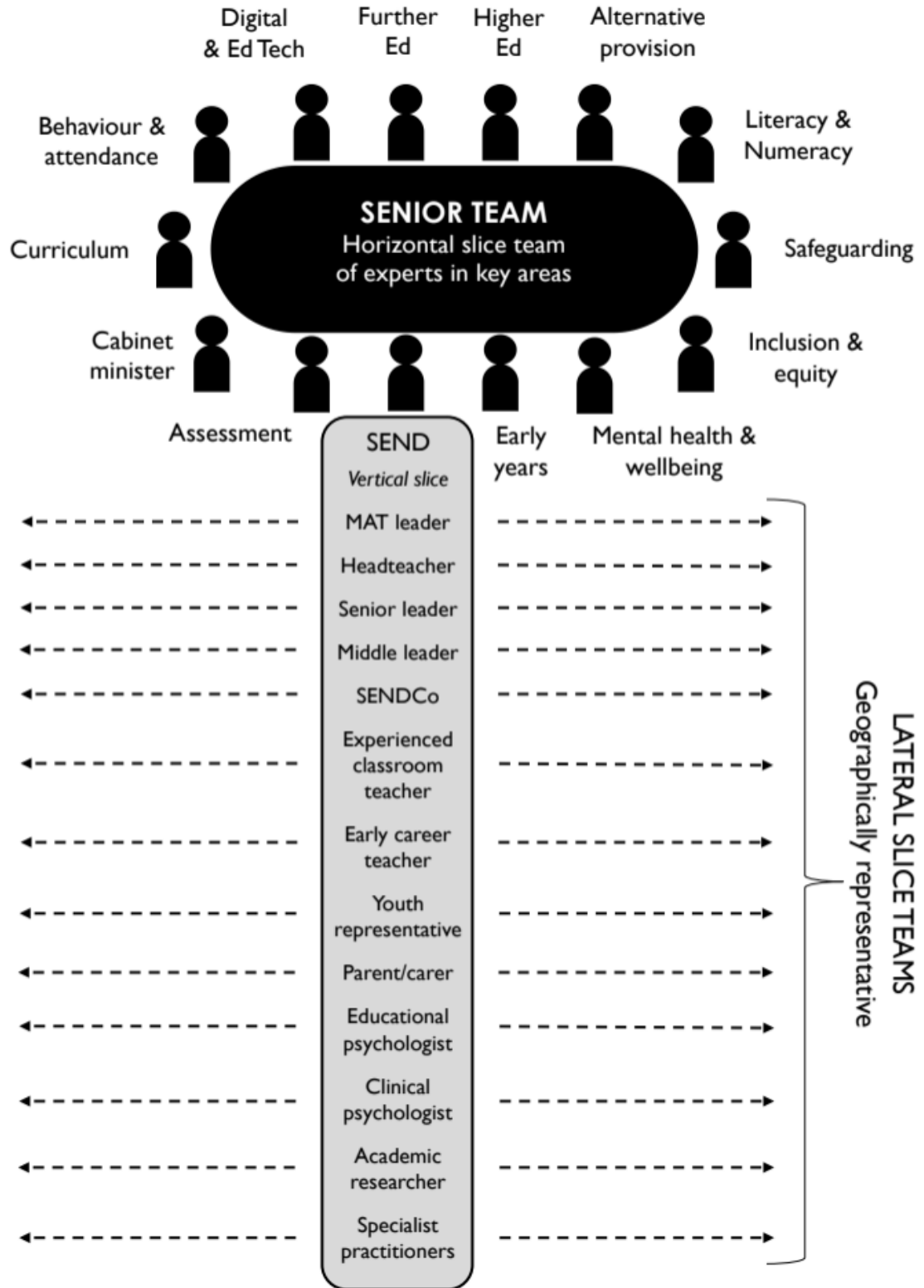


Figure 2. Slice politics at the Department for Education.

7.2.1. A horizontal slice team of senior policy leads

The Department for Education's senior policy leads would form a horizontal slice team, with each member responsible for a defined area of education policy such as SEND, literacy and numeracy, safeguarding or early years. Each member would:

- **Bring deep experience** in research, practice or policy.
- **Coordinate strategy** within their domain, working across institutional boundaries.
- **Remain accountable to the Secretary of State** and the public through transparent governance arrangements.

This team would provide coherence across the system, ensuring that policy areas reinforce rather than undermine one another.

7.2.2. A vertical slice team for each policy area

Each policy lead would be supported by a vertical slice team made up of people with direct, varied experience of that policy area. For example, the policy lead on mental health might work with a team including:

- a school leader experienced in whole-school wellbeing approaches;
- a classroom teacher with pastoral responsibilities;
- a young person with lived experience of CAMHS or school-based support;
- a parent or carer navigating mental health provision;
- a researcher specialising in child and adolescent mental health;
- a clinical psychologist;
- a practitioner from a charity such as YoungMinds;
- a civil servant with extensive departmental experience; and
- representatives from local youth services, local authorities or the NHS.

These vertical slice teams would:

- **Integrate lived and professional insight** to inform policy design.
- **Identify root causes and barriers** and design responsive, workable solutions.
- **Pilot and adapt strategies** before national rollout.
- **Act as a bridge** between national policy and frontline delivery.

7.2.3. Lateral slice teams for reach and diversity

To ensure that policy is informed by local knowledge and responds to diverse contexts, each vertical team member would be connected to a lateral slice team – a wider network of peers in similar roles across different regions. These lateral teams would:

- **Share insights** from their own regions and roles.
- **Provide feedback** on policy ideas being tested in real time.
- **Ensure that implementation challenges are anticipated** early and addressed.
- **Support peer learning** across the system.
- **Provide mutual accountability.**

7.2.4. Extending the model across government

Although this paper focuses on education, the same horizontal-vertical-lateral structure could be applied across government. In a department responsible for health, housing, transport or climate, a horizontal slice team of policy leads would each be supported by a vertical slice team of people with direct experience of the issue, in turn connected to lateral teams of peers across the country. The challenges best suited to this approach are those that are complex, fast-changing and reliant on a combination of technical expertise and lived experience. Starting in education – where the evidence base and participatory traditions are strong – would provide a proving ground for a model that could, in time, be adopted more widely.

7.3. How slice teams would operate

Slice teams would work through three-phase cycles of formation, co-creation and learning, drawing on established approaches from implementation and improvement science, deliberative democracy and systems thinking.

7.3.1. Formation, team-building and optimisation

Slice teams are communities of shared responsibility, bringing together people with different forms of experience and authority. The formation and orientation phase is therefore designed to establish legitimacy, trust and the conditions for constructive collaboration:

- **Transparent recruitment**, with attention to role diversity, geographic representation, and relevant expertise.
- **A shared values framework and code of conduct**, aligned with principles of public life.
- **Structured onboarding and team-building** to establish trust and shared purpose.

- **Agreed ways of working** that support inclusive dialogue and constructive disagreement.
- **Digital and physical infrastructure** to support collaboration across teams.

7.3.2. Policy co-creation

Once established, slice teams would move into a co-creation phase. Rather than starting from abstract proposals, teams would:

- **Coordinate across the horizontal slice team** to maintain coherence.
- **Draw on vertical teams** to identify real-world challenges and priorities.
- **Test ideas through lateral networks** to assess feasibility and equity.

Teams would apply methods from implementation science, design thinking, and deliberative democracy (see Section 7.5), generating proposals grounded in experience and stress-tested before implementation.

7.3.3. Implementation and evaluation

Slice teams would function as learning systems during implementation, embedding iteration and feedback from the outset. Teams would:

- **Launch real-world pilots** or phased rollouts, informed by insight from all three slice layers.
- **Monitor outcomes** using simple, meaningful, and transparent metrics.
- **Work in partnership** with civil servants, regulators, and delivery partners.
- **Share updates** publicly to build trust, support accountability, and promote shared learning.
- **Feed effective strategies** into national policy and legislation.

7.4. Appointing slice teams

Slice team membership would be determined through transparent, plural recruitment processes designed to balance legitimacy, inclusion and effectiveness. The aim is to ensure that teams reflect the full diversity of the community an issue affects – the broad majority whose lives are most shaped by education decisions, rather than a narrow group at the centre.

Appointments could be made through a combination of:

- **Civic selection methods** such as sortition, to support democratic legitimacy and ensure the inclusion of voices not usually heard in policymaking.
- **Open calls for participation**, accessible to anyone who wishes to contribute.
- **Targeted outreach**, to ensure diversity of perspective, geography and lived experience.

Appointments would be time-limited and aligned with the parliamentary cycle. For example, slice team members could serve up to two terms, with second-term members supporting succession and knowledge transfer, helping to preserve institutional memory without entrenching power.

Party affiliation would play no role in participation. Slice teams should not be party-political bodies, but shared problem-solving spaces, designed to bring together people with different backgrounds, roles and political views around a shared commitment to public purpose.

7.5. How policy would be developed and decided

Slice politics is designed to strengthen existing democratic institutions and professional roles by improving how they work together. By clarifying where slice teams add value at each stage of the policy process, this model helps ensure that ideas are better informed, decisions better tested, and implementation more responsive to real-world conditions.

In the formative stage, where ideas are often generated by think tanks, parties and academics, slice teams can bring fresh insight and grounded reality checks – helping assess how those ideas might land in practice.

In the deliberative stage, where ministers and committees shape the political direction of policy, slice teams would offer an agile, real-world testing ground – producing evidence of what works and helping to refine trade-offs before formal decisions are made.

In the technical and implementation stage, where civil servants traditionally lead, slice teams would operate as iterative learning loops – helping ensure implementation is viable, responsive, and informed by feedback from the ground.

By involving diverse stakeholders earlier and more systematically, this model would strengthen the work of all involved, rather than replacing it.

Slice teams would work in iterative cycles using a systematic approach drawn from implementation and improvement science, deliberative democracy and agile governance. These might include practices such as:

- **Backward design**: starting with intended outcomes and working backwards to determine necessary evidence and strategies.
- **Root cause analysis**: uncovering the structural drivers behind persistent problems.
- **Agile sprints**: working in short, iterative cycles to test and refine ideas.

- **Deliberative dialogue:** creating space for structured, inclusive conversations that weigh trade-offs and enable collective decision-making.
- **Focused conversation method:** using frameworks such as the ORID framework (Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, Decisional) to structure dialogue, ensuring that diverse perspectives are heard and decisions are grounded in evidence, values and lived experience.
- **Participatory scenario planning:** exploring long-term risks and opportunities through structured public foresight exercises.
- **Pivot or persevere meetings:** structured points for reviewing evidence and deciding next steps.

7.6. Where would slice teams be based?

Central government in the UK is one of the most geographically concentrated in the democratic world. Most national decisions are made in Westminster and Whitehall by people who often live, work, and think in the same 'bubble'. This breeds distrust, creates an exclusive 'us and them' dynamic and weakens legitimacy.

Slice politics offers an opportunity to rebalance this. Education is delivered in every community in the country, and the department's decision-making should reflect that. Most major slice teams would be based outside London, embedded in the places where education happens. For example:

- A national Slice Office for education could build on the department's existing significant presence outside London, including in Sheffield, Coventry and Darlington.
- Regional slice teams could be embedded in different parts of the country to capture place-based insight – from the distinct challenges of the North East and coastal communities to rural provision and the particular context of London.
- Lateral networks would connect these teams, ensuring that regional variation informs national decisions in real time.

This would help redistribute the geography of power, strengthen regional economies and root national education policy in a broad range of lived realities.

7.7. Governance and transparency

Slice teams would operate according to three core principles:

- **Transparency:** meetings, methods, and outputs would be openly documented and published.

- **Accountability:** clear goals, meaningful metrics, and regular reporting cycles would track progress.
- **Inclusion:** teams would be proactively designed to reflect diverse perspectives, especially those most affected by the issues at hand.

A central Slice Office would support recruitment, coordination, learning and quality assurance across teams. Together, these structures would ensure that slice politics strengthens democracy rather than bypassing it, making government more grounded, more trustworthy and better able to learn in real time.

8. Risks, limitations, open questions

No proposal for reform is risk-free, and slice politics is no exception. Good policymaking means acknowledging uncertainty and designing with care; this is not a weakness but a responsibility. Slice politics must therefore be introduced cautiously, tested openly and remain subject to revision. This section sets out key risks, limitations and open questions, alongside possible safeguards and areas for further exploration.

8.1. Democratic legitimacy and constitutional alignment

Slice politics aims to strengthen representative democracy by improving how lived and professional expertise informs decisions, while keeping elected ministers accountable for outcomes.

Each slice team would be appointed and overseen by the Secretary of State, who would remain accountable to Parliament and the public. However, within the team, responsibility would be shared. Like a cabinet committee, the slice team would operate on the principle of collective responsibility for its policy area, within a framework of ministerial accountability.

To maintain democratic legitimacy:

- **Ministers would appoint teams**, act as liaisons to Parliament, and retain constitutional accountability.
- **Slice teams would co-design and develop policy**, using transparent methods and open reporting.
- **Parliament would retain legislative authority** and oversight.

This proposal strengthens representative democracy by improving how decisions are made under democratic oversight. Slice teams would operate within Parliament's authority: they would be appointed by ministers, operate within a clear governance framework, and remain accountable through transparent protocols. Responsibility would be shared across institutions and participants, reinforcing the link between public decision-making and the people it serves.

When a single person is responsible for a vast, complex policy area, the risk of failure is high. There are many examples from recent history of ministers launching policy initiatives that are poorly designed, out of touch with frontline realities, and which are soon retracted, reversed or watered down.

In contrast, slice teams pool insight from a broad base of professional, lived and civic expertise, strengthening the decisions that ministers bring before Parliament. This model blends accountability with collective, participatory decision-making. It enhances legitimacy by opening up the black box of policymaking and rooting it in diverse perspectives and real-world insight.

8.2. Questions for consideration

There are several constitutional questions about how slice politics might be implemented. The questions that follow involve trade-offs between agility, legitimacy and accountability. The aim is to explore and refine plausible options for consultation and co-design, rather than to prescribe a single model.

How might slice teams be integrated into parliamentary processes?

Should slice team proposals be brought before Parliament via ministers, select committees, or dedicated procedures? Should slice teams have the right to trigger debates, submit white papers, or recommend amendments? What mechanisms would ensure democratic scrutiny without creating unnecessary bureaucracy?

How should slice teams relate to the civil service?

Should slice teams be integrated into existing departmental frameworks, or operate in parallel under new protocols? Should civil servants be embedded within slice teams, or serve as liaisons? How might roles be clarified to prevent duplication or tension?

Is statutory reform required?

Is new legislation needed to establish a legal footing for slice teams, or could they operate under existing powers (e.g. as departmental committees or public advisory bodies)? What reforms would ensure transparency, continuity, and appropriate limits on executive discretion?

What protections and limits are needed?

Should slice teams publish dissenting reports if consensus is not reached? Should their decisions be subject to judicial review, ombudsman oversight, or citizen appeals? How can safeguards balance agility with accountability?

What democratic safeguards should be in place?

Should certain decisions – such as those affecting children’s rights or statutory entitlements – require additional scrutiny? What boundaries should uphold democratic norms and guard against overreach?

How could slice teams support wider engagement?

As the model matures, how might slice teams contribute to engagement beyond the department – enhancing, rather than undermining, the system’s capacity to respond to challenges and collaborate with partners across health, local government and the wider public sector?

8.3. Viability and funding

Building and sustaining slice teams will require investment. Senior horizontal slice team members would be salaried on a full-time basis to reflect their central role in shaping and implementing policy. Vertical and lateral contributors would be compensated fairly for their part-time input, recognising the value of their knowledge while respecting other ongoing commitments. Dedicated infrastructure, training, and coordination support would also be needed.

But this must be weighed against the costs of the status quo: failed reforms, a disillusioned workforce, widening gaps, and long-term social and economic harm. Good policymaking costs money, but so does failure – especially when it deepens inequality or contributes to long-term harm to children’s life chances.

To manage viability, a cautious approach would:

- **Start with focused pilots** in high-impact areas.
- **Phase rollout** based on capacity and learning.
- **Use innovation and reform budgets** to fund early work.
- **Explore partnerships** with philanthropy and civil society.

A full cost-benefit model should be developed to inform next steps. Questions for further exploration include:

- What scale of initial investment is needed to build credible pilots?
- Which policy areas are most suitable for early-stage funding?
- What existing funding streams could be repurposed to support slice teams?
- How can value be evaluated in a way that includes social as well as economic outcomes?

8.4. Recruitment and representativeness

One of the most complex challenges for slice politics is assembling diverse and representative teams without falling into tokenism, co-option, or bureaucratic overload. To be legitimate and effective, slice teams must reflect the diversity of the public they serve while remaining focused, coherent and action-oriented.

Risks include:

- Over-reliance on self-selecting professionals or policy insiders.
- Underrepresentation of marginalised communities or people with lived experience.

- Co-option by powerful interest groups or partisan actors.

To mitigate these risks, recruitment should be undertaken with the horizontal-vertical-lateral structure in mind:

- **Open, transparent recruitment processes** with independent oversight and clear eligibility criteria.
- Vertical slice teams should include **a range of lived, professional and political perspectives**, spanning roles and levels of seniority.
- Lateral slice teams should be **geographically diverse** and designed to capture regional variation and place-based insight.
- Horizontal slice teams should **actively seek out missing voices** and ensure cross-cutting representation from multiple sectors.
- **Demographic data** should be collected, tracked, and reviewed regularly to monitor equity and inclusion.
- **Citizen panels or juries** may be used alongside targeted recruitment to ensure legitimacy and broaden participation.

Questions for further exploration include:

- What criteria should be used to assess representativeness across slice teams?
- How can recruitment processes ensure accessibility and fairness at scale?
- What role should citizen panels or sortition play in team composition?
- How should demographic, geographic, and experiential diversity be balanced?
- What mechanisms will ensure lived experience informs policy at every level?

8.5. Bureaucratic friction and system inertia

Public systems are built for stability, rather than agility. For slice politics to succeed, teams will need to navigate entrenched norms in Whitehall and regulatory structures. This transition will require cultural as well as structural change.

To support adoption, practical steps might include:

- **Launching early pilots** with civil service input to test feasibility, build capacity, and demonstrate impact.
- **Creating joint roles and secondments** between the department and slice teams to promote collaboration and break down silos.

- **Establishing a central Slice Office** to coordinate logistics, ensure consistency, and support ongoing learning across teams.
- **Building trust through transparency**, regular communication, and visible early wins.

One promising area of development is the integration of AI to enhance deliberative decision-making. For example, the Taiwanese government recently pioneered the use of AI to enhance deliberative decision-making, summarising diverse inputs in real time and mapping areas of consensus and disagreement. Applying similar practices within slice politics could help reduce bureaucratic friction by automating routine tasks, improving sense-making across diverse inputs, and freeing up time for learning, dialogue and creative, collaborative problem-solving.

Questions for further exploration include:

- What barriers in the civil service are likely to slow adoption?
- How can civil servants be supported to work alongside slice teams without role confusion?
- What kind of training or capacity-building is needed for both new and existing staff?
- What governance mechanisms would ensure alignment across the department while preserving team autonomy?

8.6. Risk of capture, burnout, or drift

Even well-appointed slice teams are not immune to risk. Over time, teams can become weighed down by complexity, captured by interest groups, or lose focus as priorities shift. Without appropriate support and safeguards, members may also face burnout, disengagement, or feel overwhelmed by the scale of the challenge.

To mitigate these risks, support structures must be designed with sustainability and integrity in mind. These might include:

- **Codes of conduct** and conflict-of-interest policies to ensure ethical decision-making and maintain public trust.
- **Term limits** and mentoring to allow for renewal, prevent stagnation, and support the development of new leaders.
- **Built-in feedback loops** to connect teams with their wider networks, enabling course correction and broader legitimacy.
- **Rotating facilitators and chairs** to distribute responsibility, avoid over-reliance on individuals, and build leadership capacity.

Questions for further exploration include:

- What governance mechanisms are needed to prevent capture or undue influence?

- How can the wellbeing of slice team members be supported and safeguarded?
- What structures could help teams stay focused without becoming rigid?
- How should feedback from the wider system be collected and acted on?
- What safeguards would ensure a healthy balance between continuity and renewal?

9. Stress-testing slice politics

Any proposal that aims to reshape how power is exercised should be scrutinised closely. Stress-testing ideas in public is not a sign of uncertainty, but of democratic maturity. This section sets out a series of common concerns and critiques that slice politics is likely to face, and explains how the model might respond to them through design choices, safeguards and ongoing learning.

9.1. Isn't this just another layer of bureaucracy? Won't it slow everything down?

Good decision-making takes time, and slice politics slows down the parts of the process that benefit from reflection: diagnosis, listening, co-design, and testing. It helps avoid rushed policymaking driven by external pressures or short-term incentives, and creates space for inclusive dialogue and the development of deep domain knowledge.

At the same time, slice teams operate in agile cycles: testing small ideas quickly, adapting based on feedback, and pivoting when needed. In many cases, this leads to faster, more effective implementation and fewer costly mistakes, combining deliberation with delivery.

9.2. What gives slice teams the right to make decisions?

Slice teams don't replace elected representatives – they support them. Ministers would appoint and oversee slice teams, remaining fully accountable to Parliament and the public. What changes is that ministers would no longer make complex decisions in isolation. Instead, they would work with a team of people selected for their lived, professional, and civic expertise in the relevant policy domain.

These are not advisory panels or one-off consultations. Slice teams are deliberative, decision-making groups appointed through transparent, inclusive processes. They co-design and test policy collaboratively, bringing real-world insight into government.

This model strengthens democratic legitimacy by widening participation, deepening accountability, and improving the quality of decisions brought before Parliament. Power would remain rooted in representative democracy, but it would be supported by a smarter, more inclusive operating system.

9.3. Won't this just be dominated by the usual suspects?

Slice teams would be recruited through transparent, proactive processes specifically designed to avoid the over-representation of familiar voices and insider networks. This would involve:

- **Active outreach** to communities and individuals often excluded from traditional policymaking.
- **Inclusive design** that values lived, professional, and civic expertise equally.
- **Open calls for participation**, accompanied by targeted support to remove access barriers.
- **Payment for all participants**, recognising time, experience, and labour – and removing financial obstacles that disproportionately affect people from underrepresented backgrounds.

Diversity would also be built into the structure itself. The combination of vertical, horizontal, and lateral slice teams ensures representation across roles, regions, and domains. This design would help reduce the concentration of power, elevate marginalised perspectives, and strengthen public trust.

While no recruitment system is perfect, slice politics creates stronger foundations for inclusion, accountability, and legitimacy than conventional models.

9.4. What if someone is obstructive or unprofessional?

It's important that slice teams include people with a wide range of perspectives – including those with whom we may strongly disagree. Constructive disagreement is a vital part of effective decision-making.

However, this diversity of thought must be underpinned by a shared commitment to collaboration, listening and public service. While diversity of opinion and robust exchanges of views should be welcomed, expectations around behaviour, contribution, and accountability would be clearly set from the start.

Where issues arise, several layers of support and redress would be available:

- **Peer accountability** mechanisms, including regular reflection sessions and feedback protocols.
- **Access to independent facilitation or mediation** to resolve tensions and support productive dialogue.
- **Clear codes of conduct**, with routes for flagging concerns safely and constructively.
- **Fair, transparent procedures for removal and replacement**, ensuring due process without derailing the team's work.

These measures would help maintain psychological safety, encourage honest disagreement and ensure that no individual or lobby group can dominate, derail or undermine a department's mission. Strong governance, combined with a supportive culture, would allow slice teams to model the kind of respectful democratic engagement we wish to see more broadly.

9.5. Will slice teams really be representative?

Slice teams are designed to go beyond traditional models of representation. They aim to bring together a wide range of voices, including those from marginalised communities, people with lived experience, and others often excluded from policy discussions. But genuine representation is not just about who is in the room – it also depends on how people are supported, included, and held to shared standards.

Participation comes with responsibilities. Safeguarding, respectful conduct, and a commitment to democratic values are as important as diversity and inclusion. Selection processes would:

- **Screen for values alignment and expected standards of conduct**, including a commitment to the Nolan Principles of Public Life.
- **Proactively support participation**, including accessible formats, flexible scheduling, and financial support where needed.
- **Provide training and mentoring**, especially for those new to policy or civic roles.
- **Exclude individuals whose behaviour undermines the integrity of the process**, including persistent breaches of conduct or discriminatory behaviour.

By combining inclusive outreach with clear expectations and robust support, slice teams aim to create spaces that are both representative and effective – where different perspectives are heard, respected, and used to shape better outcomes for all.

9.6. Won't this be expensive?

Slice politics will require a degree of public investment. A participatory, learning-oriented democracy cannot be run on goodwill and unpaid labour. But this isn't about 'big government' for its own sake. It's about creating an operating system fit for the 21st century that will save money in the medium-to-long-term.

Slice teams would be lean, time-bound, and integrated into existing systems. Many members could be employed on secondment or fixed-term contracts within departmental budgets.

The costs should be weighed against the hidden price of policy failure: botched reforms, widening gaps, wasted spending, and public disengagement. Even modest improvements in policy design and implementation could deliver huge social and economic returns.

Some costs could be offset by:

- Reallocating roles and responsibilities from existing policy units.
- Streamlining or replacing traditional consultation and engagement budgets.
- Drawing from innovation, participation, or public sector transformation funds.
- Exploring philanthropic and cross-sector partnerships in the pilot phase.

A full cost-benefit analysis should be undertaken during pilot development.

9.7. How would slice teams work with the civil service and Parliament?

Slice teams are designed to work alongside ministers and civil servants, strengthening democratic decision-making rather than replacing it. Ministers would remain accountable to Parliament and the public, and continue to lead on bringing forward legislation and making final decisions.

Civil servants would work in close partnership with slice teams, offering policy support, operational advice, and knowledge of existing systems and constraints. Where appropriate, civil servants could be seconded into slice teams, or act as liaisons to promote coordination and shared learning.

Slice teams would become part of the policymaking infrastructure, with clear protocols to govern how proposals are developed, tested, and progressed through government. These protocols would be co-designed with the department and grounded in a shared commitment to transparency, inclusion and continuous system improvement.

In this way, slice teams would act as a bridge – connecting ministers, civil servants, frontline practitioners, and the public in an ongoing process of learning, innovation and accountable delivery.

9.8. Could this model be captured by lobbyists or special interests?

Capture by well-organised or well-funded interests is an ever-present risk in any democratic system – and one that is already deeply embedded in current policymaking structures. Slice politics actively reduces this risk by distributing influence more widely, embedding transparency, and grounding decisions in public values and lived experience.

Several safeguards can help protect against undue influence:

- **Diverse and rotating membership**, ensuring that no single individual, group or viewpoint becomes entrenched over time.
- **Open publication of deliberations, evidence, and funding sources**, allowing public scrutiny and reducing the space for opaque lobbying.
- **Independent oversight** by a central Slice Office, responsible for ensuring fair processes, monitoring conflicts of interest, and upholding standards.
- **Clear codes of conduct** and conflict-of-interest policies, enforced consistently across all teams.

- **Broad recruitment pipelines** that prevent narrow self-selection and widen the pool of voices involved in decision-making.

By design, slice teams reduce dependency on insider access and create more visible, accountable pathways for shaping policy. They offer a more resilient, transparent and participatory model of decision-making, strengthening safeguards against capture compared with the status quo.

9.9. Won't people burn out?

Sustaining participation over time is a critical challenge, and slice politics is designed with this in mind. The model recognises that effective public service must be balanced with personal wellbeing, especially for those bringing lived experience or working in demanding frontline roles.

Several structural features would help mitigate the risk of burnout:

- **Senior horizontal team members would be salaried** and limited to two terms, with clear pathways for mentoring and succession to maintain momentum without overburdening individuals.
- **Vertical and lateral contributors would participate on a part-time, flexible basis**, allowing people to contribute meaningfully without needing to step away from their primary roles or responsibilities.
- **Lateral networks would distribute effort geographically**, encouraging collaboration across regions and reducing pressure on any one group.
- **Each slice team would build in rhythms of reflection, renewal, and rest**, such as scheduled breaks, rotational leadership, and dedicated space for checking in on wellbeing.
- **Support systems**, including peer coaching, professional development, and logistical assistance, would help teams remain focused and energised.

Slice teams would be structured learning environments where people can contribute at a sustainable pace. Careful design and ongoing support are central to making this model work for the long haul.

9.10. What happens if it doesn't work?

No governance model is fool-proof, and slice politics does not pretend to be. What sets it apart is its core commitment to continuous learning and adaptation.

Slice politics is an agile learning system, designed to evolve over time based on evidence, lived experience and real-world results.

If something isn't working, the model has built-in mechanisms to detect and address it:

- **Regular feedback loops** within and across slice teams to identify challenges early.
- **Time-limited terms** for members to ensure fresh insight and guard against inertia or entrenchment.
- **Transparent evaluation** of proposals, processes, and outcomes, shared publicly to support learning and trust.
- **Independent oversight** from a central Slice Office, with a mandate to monitor, recommend adjustments, and ensure accountability.
- **Open channels for challenge and improvement**, including from citizens, civil society and Parliament.

Problems and setbacks are an inevitable feature of public life. What's important is how we respond. Slice politics builds in the humility and agility needed to listen, adapt and improve – not just when crises emerge, but as a matter of routine.

10. Next steps

This green paper is intended to spark a much-needed shift in how education policy is made. The challenges we face demand more than incremental reform or better messaging. They call for new ways of sharing power, learning from experience and governing in conditions of uncertainty. Slice politics offers a blueprint; the task now is to test it, refine it and build confidence in its use.

Change of this kind will not happen overnight. But it can begin now, through practical experimentation, open learning and sustained engagement with the sector and the public. The following actions outline a pathway from concept to implementation.

10.1. Immediate actions

- Share this green paper (or a simplified version of it) with departmental leaders, sector bodies, school and trust leaders, unions, researchers and the wider public.
- Host roundtable discussions and open forums with the education sector and interested members of the public.
- Launch a public consultation to gather views, critiques, and ideas for improvement – and to bring people into the process.

10.2. Short-term goals (12 months)

- Pilot 2-3 slice teams in high-priority areas such as SEND, attendance, mental health, or teacher recruitment and retention.
- Develop clear protocols for recruitment, support, succession and evaluation.
- Invite detailed peer review of the ideas in *Section 7: What slice politics would look like at the Department for Education* from policy scholars, former civil servants, sector leaders and systems practitioners, through expert roundtables or online symposia.
- Partner with the Education Endowment Foundation and the wider What Works community to embed evaluation from the outset.
- Run pilots in partnership with schools, trusts and local authorities, sharing process and learning publicly.
- Explore partnerships with international think tanks, research centres and governments experimenting with participatory or systems-led governance.

10.3. Medium-term goals (18-24 months)

- Extend the approach across the department's major policy areas, building a network of slice teams.
- Publish a progress report sharing learning from pilots, consultations and early experimentation.
- Publish a detailed implementation plan for embedding the model in the department's ways of working.
- Explore how the model could be extended to other government departments where challenges are complex and reliant on both expertise and lived experience.

Conclusion

Our policymaking ecosystem is no longer fit for purpose. The old models are struggling, trust is fragile, and the pace of change is outstripping our capacity to respond. But the status quo is not inevitable. Within these interlocking challenges lies an opportunity to reimagine how decisions get made, and who gets to make them.

Slice politics offers a new operating system for government. It's a way of governing that replaces top-down command with structured collaboration, and episodic consultation with ongoing participation. It brings together people with lived, professional, and civic experience to co-create solutions in real-world settings – not just as a 'listening exercise' but as a permanent, embedded feature of how government works. The model is bold, practical, and already proven in other sectors. It scales what works, cuts waste, and closes the gap between what we know and what we do.

For any government serious about education, slice politics offers a credible route to lasting system improvement. It speaks to the deepest strengths of the education system – its professionalism, its participatory traditions, its commitment to every child – while offering a governing model that is serious, distinctive and fit for the challenges of the coming decades. It shifts power away from a narrow centre and towards the children, families and professionals whose lives are most shaped by education policy. Most of all, it shows what a better way of doing politics could feel like.

This paper has set out the case, the model and a possible pathway for action. The invitation now is to test the ideas, improve them in practice and build momentum from the ground up.

Let's shift from doing education policy to people, to doing it with people – and build a system that is more intelligent, more inclusive and better able to serve the children and communities it exists to support.

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About the author



Dr James Mannion is a teacher educator and government adviser specialising in implementation and improvement science, oracy and self-regulated learning. He is the author of *Making Change Stick: A Practical Guide to Implementing School Improvement* (Hachette Learning, 2025), a research-informed implementation system developed over ten years and trialled in partnership with schools across the UK and internationally.

A former teacher and school leader, James has an MA in person-centred education from the University of Sussex and a PhD in self-regulated learning from the University of Cambridge. In 2022, James gave a TEDx talk outlining the case for slice politics ([How to Change the World](#)), and later developed the idea in his White Paper [Slice Teams: From Top-Down Failure To Lasting School Improvement](#) (Hachette Learning, 2025).

James recently authored the Welsh Government's Learner Effectiveness Programme, a national initiative designed to strengthen learner agency and improve outcomes for learners from early years to post-16. He also serves on the Welsh Government's Literacy Expert Panel. He has worked with hundreds of schools and multi-academy trusts to build capacity for research-informed improvement using the tools of implementation and improvement science.