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Framework to review programmes

DP 11538-001 • September 2017

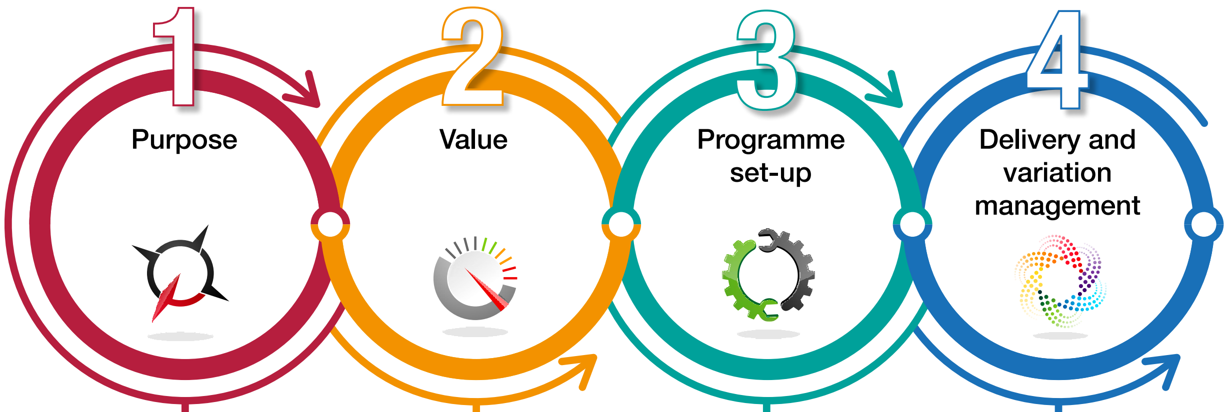
The National Audit Office scrutinises public spending for Parliament and is independent of government. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), Sir Amyas Morse KCB, is an Officer of the House of Commons and leads the NAO. The C&AG certifies the accounts of all government departments and many other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to examine and report to Parliament on whether departments and the bodies they fund have used their resources efficiently, effectively, and with economy. Our studies evaluate the value for money of public spending, nationally and locally. Our recommendations and reports on good practice help government improve public services, and our work led to audited savings of £734 million in 2016.

Major programmes are expensive, high profile and carry great uncertainties and risks. It is not surprising that many fall short of their objectives, in terms of cost and/or outcomes.

This framework draws together the key questions we ask when we review major programmes, based on our experience and taking account the findings of our reports. It was developed for our value-for-money auditors to use when reviewing programmes, but may be useful for those seeking an overview of our work on projects and programmes.

About this framework

The framework is structured into four elements that should be considered at each stage of a project or programme:



Purpose
Is there a strategic need for the programme and is this the right programme to meet the business need?

Value
Does the programme provide value for money?

Programme set-up
Is the programme set up in accordance with good practice and are risks being well managed?

Delivery and variation management
Are mechanisms in place to deliver the intended outcomes and respond to change, and is the programme progressing according to plan?

Evidence base

This framework is based on our experience of around 100 studies reviewing public sector programmes over the last seven years. The main NAO reports are available on our Managing major projects web-page, including good practice guides such as Initiating successful projects. See in-depth tools for further useful resources. The guide reflects our work up to April 2017. It is an evolving framework and we expect to add to and amend it as further evidence becomes available.

Using this framework

This framework is not intended to be a checklist. It is a flexible approach that can be tailored, based on issues such as the stage and type of programme. We designed it for auditing major government projects and programmes, but the elements are also relevant when examining any project or suite of projects.

Our audit approach depends on the context of each examination, and we make our assessments on a case-by-case basis. We may apply the framework within a wider set of audit questions. Auditors use other NAO resources, detailed under in-depth tools, and deploy their own experience and judgement to probe deeper into areas of particular interest on each programme.

Our audit approach evolves over time and responds to the challenges government faces. Accordingly, we expect the framework to develop further, and the questions we ask may change in the future.

This framework can be applied to programmes or individual projects. When we examine portfolios of programmes, we ask some of these questions and consider other issues, such as prioritisation and resource allocation.

The framework comprises 18 top level audit questions, each with suggested sub-questions. We generally ask the main questions first, then use the sub-questions to get more information, if needed. Many of the questions are interrelated. The ‘essential evidence’ section contains suggested documentation that may provide the answers, but it is not exhaustive.

The examples from our studies illustrate how we have reported our answers to such questions for a wide range of programmes.

More specific tools to help with examining some issues, types of programme or delivery methods are detailed under in-depth tools.

1 Purpose

Need for programme
Is it clear what objective the programme is intended to achieve?

Portfolio management and dependencies
Does the project make sense in relation to the organisation's strategic priorities?

Stakeholder engagement
Have the right people bought into the programme eg users, suppliers, those who have to implement it?

2 Value

Option appraisal
Does the option chosen meet the programme's objective and provide long-term value?

Business case
Does the business case demonstrate value for money over the lifetime of the programme?

Cost and schedule
Has the programme built up robust estimates of cost and schedule, including all programme components?

Benefits
Does the programme: have a baseline; know what measurable change it is going to make; and actually measure it? Are benefits being achieved?

3 Programme set-up

Governance and assurance
Are there effective structures (internal and external) which provide strong and effective oversight, challenge and direction?

Leadership and culture
Does the programme have strong leadership with the necessary authority and influence?

Resources
Has the organisation the resources (staffing, skills, equipment etc.) required to deliver the programme?

Putting the programme into practice
Are scope and business requirements realistic, understood, clearly articulated and capable of being put into practice?

Risk management
Are key risks identified, understood and addressed?

4 Delivery and variation management

Delivery strategy
Are there appropriate incentives for all parties to deliver (contractual, performance management, or other)?

Change control
Is there an effective mechanism to control programme scope?

Responding to external change
Is the programme sufficiently flexible to deal with setbacks and changes in the operating context?

Performance management
Is progress being measured and assessed including consideration that the programme is still the right thing to do?

Lessons learned
Is the programme learning from experience on the current programme and previous relevant programmes?

Transition to business as usual
Does the programme have a clear plan for transfer to operations/business as usual?

The framework comprises 18 key questions grouped into the four main elements we consider when we audit programmes.

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Key audit question

1 Need for programme

Is it clear what objective the programme is intended to achieve?

Sub-questions

Has the need for a programme been established?

Is there a clear understanding of the current position, the shortcomings that the programme is intended to address and the desired outcome? And is it clear that the programme, if delivered, would address the need?

Are there clear, realistic objectives and an understanding of what success looks like?

Essential evidence

Statement of what the programme is intended to achieve – likely to be in strategic business case.

Need for programme – examples from our studies

Our 2016 report Delivering value through the apprenticeships programme examined whether the Department for Education (DfE) could demonstrate that the increasingly employer-led apprenticeships programme was achieving value for money. DfE has been undertaking the complex challenge of expanding and reforming the apprenticeships programme, while ensuring quality, to a tight time frame. At the time of our report it was still in the early stages of the transition, and was making progress in a number of areas. However, there remained some important gaps in its approach. At the most strategic level, DfE had not set out the collective impact that the programme was intended to achieve, how the increase in apprenticeship numbers could deliver the maximum gain in economic productivity, and how it would influence the mix of apprenticeships in order to deliver the most value.

Our report Green Deal and Energy Company Obligation (ECO) evaluated how the former Department of Energy & Climate Change (DECC) had designed, implemented and managed these two schemes. We found that DECC did not set clear success criteria for the Green Deal. Ministers were highly ambitious about the number of homes the Green Deal would make more energy efficient, but DECC did not set any expectations for the Green Deal. It did not state what proportion of measures' total cost should be paid for by the households that benefited, either through Green Deal finance or other means such as savings. Nor did it quantify the amount of CO_2 the Green Deal should save in addition to suppliers' minimum obligations through ECO. This meant it could not compare the scheme's progress against its expectations, to identify early warning signs that performance was off-track.

Other relevant reports

Early review of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Delivery Programme (paragraphs 13 and 14)

High Speed 2: A review of early programme preparation (paragraph 6)

Planning for 100% local retention of business rates (paragraph 15)

Upgrading emergency services communications: the Emergency Services Network (paragraph 19)

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Key audit question

2 Portfolio management and dependencies

Does the project make sense in relation to the organisation's strategic priorities?

Sub-questions

How does the programme address the highest priority strategic needs of the organisation?

What other programmes are active at the same time to address these strategic needs?

Is there good understanding of other organisations' programmes that may impact on the operating environment of the programme?

Is there an approach in place to manage the interdependencies between different policies, teams, organisations?

Is there evidence of timely and consistent communication between those with an interest in the outcome being sought?

Does the project make sense in relation to the resources available to the organisation? (see also Question 10)

Essential evidence

Statement that programme fits with organisational strategy – likely to be in Single Departmental Plan.

Portfolio management and dependencies – examples from our studies

In The London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games: post-Games review we reported that, before 2009, the London Olympics programme was characterised by individual organisations focusing on specific elements for which they were responsible, such as construction, security or transport. From 2009, the Government Olympic Executive established seven cross-cutting work streams. An overarching programme brief helped work streams to understand their position in the programme, the board for each work stream had representation from the others, and the Senior Responsible Owners (SRO) for each work stream met to discuss overall progress with integration of the programme at meetings of the London 2012 SROs Group.

Welfare reform – lessons learned examined lessons learned from the Department for Work & Pensions' (DWP) implementation of recent welfare reforms such as Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment and child maintenance. We estimated that it had introduced around 30 distinct programmes over five years – involving some change to almost every benefit DWP managed. There were some important and high-profile early failings, but DWP introduced a large number of reforms with few signs of operational problems and was continuing to make progress in major programmes. However, we found that DWP didn't have sufficient understanding of its portfolio of programmes or overall capacity to manage all these programmes. It also continued to develop the programmes despite recognising the risks of doing so at the same time as reducing costs and reorganising the department. In 2011, it created a team to start to manage and provide assurance over the whole portfolio. At the time of our report, DWP's approach was still evolving and it was reorganising responsibilities for portfolio management.

Other relevant reports

Army 2020 (paragraphs 2.1 to 2.2 and 2.36 to 2.43)

Managing budgeting in government (paragraph 10)

Modernising the Great Western railway (paragraph 8)

Shared service centres (paragraph 13)

Key audit question

3 Stakeholder engagement

Have the right people bought into the programme eg users, suppliers, those who have to implement it?

Sub-questions

Have all stakeholders been identified and their influences understood?

Have they been engaged and roles and responsibilities established?

Are key stakeholders supportive of the programme?

Is there a stakeholder management plan?

Is there a complementary communications plan?

Essential evidence

Stakeholder engagement strategy.

Stakeholder engagement – examples from our studies

Progress on the government estate strategy (2017) examined the Government Property Unit's (GPU) strategy to make savings in the central government estate by creating regional property hubs and centralising the management of the estate. It found that the Cabinet Office (in which the GPU sits) had yet to achieve strong commitments from most departments to making these key programmes work, and that limited progress had been made towards creating a shared, flexible and integrated estate. It recommended that the GPU should take stock and, if necessary, delay, redesign or consider phasing the programmes over a longer timescale.

E-borders and successor programmes were set up by the Home Office to collect better information about individuals entering and leaving the UK to aid security and other decision-making. Our 2015 report set out how, during the period of the e-borders programme, the Home Office made unrealistic assumptions about programme delivery without recognising the importance of managing a diverse range of stakeholders, particularly transport carriers. These difficulties affected progress in rolling out e-borders from the outset. Following the cancellation of the e-borders contract the Home Office took more direct ownership of external relationships and transport carriers told us that understanding of needs and requirements between themselves and the Home Office had improved.

Our report also found that across the 12 years, there was insufficient continuity of key staff and the programme had to rely on contractors. In this context, leaders had made ill-conceived decisions. Improvements were made in late 2014, when the programme built a leadership team with a mix of the necessary operational, technical and stakeholder management experience. The Home Office also adopted a slower approach to developing new systems, which we considered was realistic given its inexperience in developing systems in-house.

Other relevant reports

Care Act first-phase reforms (paragraphs 8 to 10)

The failure of the FiReControl project (paragraph 5)

Investigation into the South East Flexible Ticketing Programme (paragraphs 3.1, 3.2 and 3.5)

The National Programme for IT in the NHS: Progress since 2006 (paragraphs 32 and 33)

Shared service centres (paragraph 15)

Upgrading emergency services communications: the Emergency Services Network (paragraphs 11 and 16)

Key audit question

4 Option appraisal

Does the option chosen meet the programme's objective and provide long-term value?

Sub-questions

Does the option appraisal explore a sufficiently broad range of options to determine what the programme should look like?

Does it include sufficient evidence from a variety of sources?

What assumptions have been made?

Is the project brief consistent with the chosen option?

Has a pilot scheme/feasibility study been considered?

Has there been learning from previous/similar programmes?

Has consideration been given to the need to demonstrate good practice?

Essential evidence

Option appraisal – should be included in business case (for investment programmes) or impact assessment (for regulatory programmes).

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Option appraisal – examples from our studies

Our 2012 study Mobile technology in policing found that value for money had not, at the point of our study, been achieved from the £80 million of expenditure. The benefits for most forces had not extended beyond a basic level with only a minority of forces having used mobile technology effectively to improve efficiency, and cash savings had been minimal. The rationale for investing in mobile technology was insufficiently developed as it was based on the requirement to deliver devices quickly within a fixed budget. The business case therefore considered a narrow range of implementation options. Options did not consider alternative technology or process improvement. The business case did not consider adequately forces' capability and capacity to introduce mobile technology, how they would use it, the amount of local expenditure required or the realism of the announced deadlines. The business case was also constrained by no central resource funding and the assumption that further funding would not be available.

Army 2020 is a programme to reduce the size of the regular Army and increase the number of trained Army reserves with the aim of helping the Army achieve savings of £10.6 billion over 10 years to 2021-22. Our 2014 study found that the option appraisal undertaken by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) did not fully assess the value for money of its chosen approach to achieve the required defence outputs while also bringing the MoD closer to its budget. In particular, the MoD did not test the feasibility or risks of increasing the number of trained Army Reservists from around 19,000 to 30,000, and of aiming to integrate regulars and reserves fully within a single force structure.

Other relevant reports

Carbon Capture and Storage: the second competition for government support (paragraph 13)

Universal Credit: progress update (paragraphs 5 and 6)

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Key audit question

5 Business case

Does the business case demonstrate value for money over the lifetime of the programme?

Sub-questions

Have the achievable benefits and outcomes been defined?

Is the funding secured?

Is there a credible estimation of all costs, appropriate for the stage of the programme?

Does the cost include the cost of enablers?

What evidence is there that the timescales are realistic?

Are decisions through the life cycle made with regard to value for money?

Essential evidence

Cost benefit analysis for the full programme – likely to be included in economic case. The financial case should highlight funding and affordability issues.

Accounting Officer's assessment of feasibility or value for money – departments will be expected to publish a summary of all such assessments made from 1 April 2017, for major projects within the Government Major Projects Portfolio which receive Outline Business Case approval after that date, or for existing projects where the need for a further assessment has arisen and been approved after that date.

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Business case – examples from our studies

Preparations for the roll-out of smart meters was our 2011 report on this programme to replace 53 million electricity and gas meters in homes and small businesses with smart meters by 2020. The former Department of Energy & Climate Change (DECC) developed the programme on the strength of its cost–benefit work that estimated that the programme would both deliver efficiency savings to energy suppliers, and enable energy consumers to change and reduce their energy use, resulting in savings on their bills and environmental benefits. There was, however, uncertainty over how much, and for how long, consumers would change their energy use and therefore whether the benefits would be fully realised. DECC's assessment of consumer impacts was based on estimates contained in a 2008 review of trials and international experiences. In our 2014 Update on preparations for smart metering, we found that the economic case for the programme remained positive but there were significant risks and challenges to successful implementation.

Our 2013 report High Speed 2: A review of early programme preparation expressed particular concern at this early stage in the programme about the lack of clarity around its objectives, concluding that the strategic case should have been better developed at this stage. The Department for Transport (DfT) had provided evidence of general growth in rail travel, but limited evidence on forecast passenger demand and expected capacity shortages on the West Coast Main Line, and so had not demonstrated the need for HS2. It was also unclear how HS2 would transform regional economies by delivering jobs and growth.

In our subsequent 2016 report, Progress with preparations for High Speed 2, we found that DfT and HS2 Ltd had taken steps to address weaknesses in the business case. The strategic context and the objectives of High Speed 2 were clearer than when we previously reported, and the business case included more detail about the scale of potential future capacity shortages – particularly on the west coast main line.

Other relevant reports

BIS's capital investment in science projects (paragraph 12)

The completion and sale of High Speed 1 (paragraphs 8 and 9)

The Department for Transport's funding of the Garden Bridge (paragraph 2)

Modernising the Great Western Railway (paragraph 7)

Progress on the government estate strategy (paragraphs 13 and 14)

Progress with the Road Investment Strategy (paragraphs 7 and 10)

Upgrading emergency services communications: the Emergency Services Network (paragraph 21)

Value

Key audit question

6 Costs and schedule

Has the programme built up robust estimates of cost and schedule, including all programme components?

Sub-questions

Have programme cost and duration estimates been developed through use of systematic and appropriate methods?

Do the cost estimates cover all elements of the programme?

Have the estimates been validated?

Is it clear where costs have been excluded?

Do costings make allowance for risk?

Does the programme have identified contingency sums aligned with the risks and uncertainties in the estimated cost components?

Does the programme schedule have the majority of its tasks on the critical path or is there some flexibility in the scheduling of individual tasks?

Does the programme record and continually update its critical path?

Are realistic milestone dates consistently reported to leadership and the organisation?

Essential evidence

Breakdown of programme cost into main components – (cost categories/contract packages, programme management overhead) including allowance for risk.

Planned start and end dates of programme phases and changes to these schedules during the programme.

Cost and schedule – examples from our studies

In our 2017 report on the Ministry of Defence (MoD) Equipment Plan 2016–2026 we concluded that risks to the affordability of the Plan were greater than at any point since reporting began in 2012, largely due to major new commitments without matching new funding, and the need to find savings. The level of cost uncertainty in the Plan had also increased considerably. Some 15% of additional commitments had not yet been costed in detail and the MoD's costing practice can lead to significant understatement in the likely cost of some projects at an early stage of development. The Plan is also vulnerable to changes in foreign exchange rates.

In our 2016 report we found that the schedule for the infrastructure programme for Modernising the Great Western railway was unrealistic. The electrification schedule was not based on a bottom-up understanding of what the works would involve and in 2014 Network Rail still underestimated the numbers of bridges to be modified, the complexity of planning permission and other consents, and was too optimistic about the productivity of new technology. As a result, the estimated cost of electrification between Maidenhead and Cardiff increased by £1.2 billion (70%) between 2014 and 2015 even though Network Rail believed it could reliably estimate the cost in 2014. Since 2015, Network Rail had taken steps to improve its programme management, including cost estimation, monitoring and governance, and strengthened its collaboration with contractors and the wider rail construction industry.

Other relevant reports

Capital funding for schools (paragraph 21)

High Speed 2: A review of early programme preparation (paragraph 10)

Progress with preparations for High Speed 2 (paragraph 11)

Investigation into the South East Flexible Ticketing Programme (paragraphs 3.5, 3.10 and 3.16)

Preparations for the roll-out of smart meters (paragraph 12)

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Value

Key audit question

7 Benefits

Does the programme: have a baseline; know what measurable change it is going to make and actually measure it? Are benefits being achieved?

Sub-questions

Has the needs analysis for the programme established the current baseline performance?

Does the programme have clear objectives that relate to measurable change?

Are there identified programme benefits and ways of measuring achievement of those objectives?

Is there an appropriate plan to establish what information needs to be captured to measure future changes in performance?

Is there a commitment to monitoring the performance to support evaluation of the programme?

Is there a commitment to review performance against the plan and to determine whether the programme has delivered the intended benefits and outcomes?

Is the programme on track to deliver intended benefits?

Essential evidence

Estimates of benefits – how compiled. Likely to be in economic case.

Benefits realisation plan/strategy.

Gateway review 4 – readiness for service and 5 – benefits realisation.

Benefits – examples from our studies

Review of the final benefits statement for programmes previously managed under the National Programme for IT in the NHS (2013) assessed the robustness of the Department of Health's (DH's) approach to compiling the cost and benefit figures for the programmes previously managed under the 'National Programme for IT'. We found that, overall, DH took a structured, logical approach to measuring and reporting costs and benefits, and that the cost figures were relatively certain. By contrast, there was considerable uncertainty about the benefit figures, around two-thirds of which had not yet been realised. Measuring the programmes' benefits was not straightforward, as many went beyond simple cost savings into wider benefits. Different programmes had to take different approaches to identify, quantify and value benefits, reflecting their different nature and programme maturity, and variations in the information provided by trusts. Although programmes' senior responsible owners reported being mindful of the risk of optimism bias in estimating benefits, DH had not systematically discounted the estimated benefits to counter optimism bias.

In 2012 in The completion and sale of High Speed 1 (HS1) we concluded that the project had delivered a high-performing railway line, which was subsequently sold in a well-managed way. But international passenger numbers were falling far short of forecasts, reducing revenues, and the project costs exceed the value of journey time saving benefits, although the programme has other impacts, some of which are unmeasurable. In our 2016 report Progress with preparations for High Speed 2, we noted that DfT had learned from HS1, where benefits had not materialised as expected, and had made a good start to planning for delivery of the regeneration benefits for HS2.

Other relevant reports

Investigation into the South East Flexible Ticketing Programme (paragraphs 2.1 to 2.4)

Mobile technology in policing (paragraphs 13 and 15)

Modernising the Great Western Railway (paragraphs 14, 18 and 19)

National Citizen Service (paragraph 11)

Planning for 100% local retention of business rates (paragraph 14)

Preparations for the roll-out of smart meters (paragraphs 9 and 10)

Progress on the government estate strategy (paragraph 7)

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Programme set-up

Key audit question

8 Governance and assurance

Are there effective structures (internal and external) that provide strong and effective oversight, challenge and direction?

See also Q16 – Reporting

Sub-questions

Is there a suitable governance structure for the programme?

Are there clearly defined roles and responsibilities?

Is there a distinct programme management team with authority and responsibility for delivering the programme?

Does the organisation's board receive timely and accurate reports on programme progress?

Is the programme integrated into the wider planning and development of the organisation?

Are the programme and oversight teams realistic about their ability to deliver and implement the programme successfully?

Do the programme sponsor and other senior stakeholders receive independent assurance on the programme?

Has the programme board responded proactively to external assurance reviews?

Essential evidence

Programme board terms of reference.

If relevant, framework document for/contract with delivery organisation.

Infrastructure and Projects Authority and Major Projects Review Group reviews.

Regular reporting of progress and issues to Senior Responsible Owner (SRO), and from SRO to organisation.

Governance and assurance – examples from our studies

Our 2012 report Lessons from cancelling the InterCity West Coast franchise found that the Department for Transport (DfT) competition to let this rail franchise lacked management oversight and the governance of the project was confused. The project also lacked clear objectives and strong project and programme management. Overall, the management took too much comfort from assurance processes, such as internal audit reports and gateway reviews, which are not a substitute for management controls. Senior management oversight was affected by:

- Considerable turnover in permanent secretaries (four in two years) and directors general.
- Staff in the project team reported to different parts of the organisation, which meant that no one person oversaw the whole process or could see patterns of emerging problems.
- The governance of the project was confused, partly because the remits of committees and the information they required were not clear, and the membership was fluid. This meant there was no clear route for the project team to get approval for issues.

Our 2013 report Universal credit: early progress (see page 39) raised serious concerns about ineffective departmental oversight, lack of transparency and challenge, and the ineffectiveness of the governance structures in addressing concerns. Before the programme was reset, the programme board lacked both the detailed plan and the management information needed for decision-making, addressing issues and measuring progress against aims. The board was too large (over 50 core members in 2012) and too inconsistent to act as an effective, accountable group. It had five senior responsible owners in the course of 2012-13 and five Programme Directors over three years. DWP recognised the governance problems and repeatedly changed the programme's governance structures, and suspended the programme board entirely during the programme's reset in 2013.

Other relevant reports

Accountability to Parliament for Taxpayers' money (paragraphs 9 and 14)

Delivering Carrier Strike (paragraphs 16 and 17)

E-borders and successor programmes (paragraph 17)

The failure of the FiReControl project (paragraph 9)

Modernising the Great Western Railway (paragraph 16)

Key audit question

9 Leadership and culture

Does the programme have strong leadership with the necessary authority and influence? – ie suitable Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) and Programme Director who can make decisions and has the support needed?

Sub-questions

Does the programme leadership have the appropriate knowledge, personal attitudes and skills required to deliver the programme?

Is the leadership suitable for the role?

Are the leadership's decisions accepted by stakeholders?

Can the programme leaders give their roles the personal time and priority needed to fulfil their duties and responsibilities?

Does the programme leadership exhibit personal ownership of the programme and provide clarity of direction?

Is there an identified programme sponsor ensuring executive commitment and oversight at the organisation's highest level? (This may be the Senior Responsible Owner if they are part of the senior management team.)

Essential evidence

SRO appointment letter (Osmotherly Rules).

Leadership and culture – examples from our studies

In 2011 we reported on The failure of the FiReControl project, which had by then been cancelled by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to cut its losses. We found that FiReControl was flawed from the outset because it did not have the support of the majority of its users – DCLG had tried to impose a national control system without having sufficient mandatory powers and without properly consulting with the Fire and Rescue Services. We also found that DCLG had underestimated the project's complexity and costs, while benefits were exaggerated. Moreover, DCLG failed to provide the necessary leadership and management to make the project successful. Issues included:

- Governance arrangements in the first five years of the project were complex and ineffective, which led to unclear lines of responsibility and slow decision-making.
- The project lacked consistent leadership and direction, and was characterised by a high turnover of staff and over-reliance on poorly managed consultants.
- Until 2009, DCLG did not take a sufficient grip to sort out early problems with delivery by the contractor for the IT system.
- Poor contract design impeded the resolution of issues and the termination of the project at an earlier stage.

Crossrail, like other DfT programmes, had a high turnover of DfT senior representatives. In this case, however, the impact was lessened because a small number of departmental staff worked in rotation on the Joint Sponsor Board, there was continuity in Transport for London staff on the programme, and Crossrail Limited's senior team had a strong track record.

DfT's oversight also benefited from the presence of a DfT-nominated non-executive director on the board of Crossrail Limited; a Project Representative, who reviewed and provided commentary on Crossrail Limited's regular progress reports to DfT, which helped DfT and Transport for London engage with and challenge Crossrail Limited effectively; and clear, high quality monthly and semi-annual reports on progress, which, on the whole, focused on the main issues of interest for sponsors, including information about Network Rail's works.

Other relevant reports

Early review of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Delivery Programme (paragraphs 16 and 17)

E-borders and successor programmes (paragraphs 16 and 20)

Lessons from cancelling the InterCity West Coast franchise competition (paragraph 10)

Universal credit: early progress (paragraph 9)

3

Programme set-up

Key audit question

10 Resources

Has the organisation the resources (staffing, capability, equipment, etc) required to deliver the programme?

Sub-questions

To what extent does achievement of the programme depend on external consultants?

Does the organisation have the required skills, experience and commitment appropriate to the stage of the programme?

Has the organisation assessed whether skills are available in government to deliver the programme and other concurrent and upcoming priority programmes?

Has the organisation considered the potential costs of securing skills that are in short supply?

Is there an appropriate level of programme management expertise in place?

Are there communication links between the programme team, and those responsible at a senior level for current and future operational model?

Are the resources deployed in the right places?

Is there sufficient capacity to deliver the programme?

Does the programme team have access to support services outside the core team, eg legal, commercial, evaluation analysis?

Has the (core) programme delivery team been involved in the design of the programme and/or are they confident of their understanding of the programme and its deliverability?

Essential evidence

Organisation chart with numbers and roles.

Recruitment Plan for key posts within the programme.

Resources – examples from our studies

Capability in the civil service examined the government's approach to identifying and closing specialist capability gaps in the civil service. Capability means the civil service's ability to implement policy effectively, requiring the right number of people, with the right skills, in the right place, supported by effective accountability, governance and information. This report, published in 2017, focused on the people aspects of capability, particularly in the light of budgetary constraints that had both impacted on staff numbers and driven ambitious transformation programmes, with different operating models and new technology.

Our report included a particular focus on plans to address specialist capability gaps, including in the management of major projects. Although the civil service had skilled people, many major projects have drawn on the same pool of skills. For example, in rail projects such as Crossrail and Thameslink, skilled civil servants have performed a number of project roles or have been moved to fill skills gaps for new priorities or projects. Our report noted that government had recently accepted that project leaders and accounting officers need to assess whether projects are feasible at the outset, including whether departments have the right skills to deliver them.

Our 2016 report Upgrading emergency service communications: the Emergency Services Network (ESN) we found that this programme generally had a positive delivery-focused culture that helped it retain staff and manage issues as they emerged. We reported both that the ESN programme benefited from stability in staffing at both senior and junior levels, and that staff on the programme had a strong record of delivering other projects. These factors helped the programme manage challenges that had arisen. They also meant that the programme was well-respected among stakeholders who were, for example, willing to approve investment in the programme despite wider government spending constraints.

Other relevant reports

Crossrail (paragraph 13)

The London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games: post-Games review (paragraphs 4.5 to 4.7)

Planning for 100% local retention of business rates (paragraph 16)

Progress on the government estate strategy (paragraph 9)

Progress with the Road Investment Strategy (paragraph 13)

Key audit question

11 Putting the programme into practice

Are scope and business requirements realistic, understood, clearly articulated and capable of being put into practice?

See also Q18 – Transition

Sub-questions

Has the programme been defined clearly?

Does the programme definition take into account likely business and external changes?

Have stakeholders endorsed the arrangements for delivering the programme?

Is there appropriate staff training and support in place to deliver the programme and effect business change?

Has the programme identified enablers to achieve its objectives (eg people, policies, funding, processes, partners, technology)? Are they in place?

Does the organisational risk management plan include risks associated with the operation of the service or capability?

Is there an appropriate disaster recovery plan?

Essential evidence

Programme brief, programme definition or programme initiation document.

Plan for implementing programme.

Operational risk management plan.

Putting the programme into practice – examples from our studies

In Modernising the Great Western railway (see page 17) we found that failings in Network Rail's approach to planning and delivering the infrastructure programme further increased costs. Network Rail did not work out a 'critical path' – the minimum feasible schedule for the work, including dependencies between key stages – before starting to deliver electrification. It failed to manage the technical challenges and risks of using new technology, specifically a new design for the electrification equipment and a new 'factory train' for installing the equipment and its supporting steel structures. Network Rail did not conduct sufficiently detailed surveys of the locations for the structures, which meant that some design work had to be repeated.

In our 2017 report, Local support for people with a learning disability, we found that there had been progress towards the goal of reducing the number of people with a learning disability in mental health hospitals. In practice, however, programme partners still needed to resolve a number of challenges to deal with the problem of sustainably getting long-stay patients out of inpatient care and into the community. We found four main barriers to progress:

- One of the key mechanisms designed to manage the flow of patients into mental health hospitals – care and treatment reviews – was not working effectively.
- Money was not yet being released from mental health hospitals quickly enough to help pay for extra community support, which could create unfunded pressure on local authorities and clinical commissioning groups.
- Partnerships were struggling to put in place appropriate accommodation quickly enough.
- Partnerships had not produced workforce plans for community provision.

Other relevant reports

Delivering carrier strike (paragraphs 10, 14 and 15)

E-borders and successor programmes (paragraph 19)

Progress on the government estate strategy (paragraph 18)

Universal credit: early progress (paragraphs 17 and 18)

Upgrading emergency services communications: the Emergency Services Network (paragraph 13)

Programme set-up

3

Key audit question

12 Risk management

Are key risks identified, understood and addressed?

Sub-questions

Has the programme adopted a systematic approach (eg horizon scanning) to identifying and considering risks?

Have foreseeable risks been identified and assessed?

Have risks been appropriately analysed to assess both the likely occurrence and the potential impact and produce a prioritised management strategy?

Have key risks been allocated an owner and a management plan in place?

Are there systematic criteria for escalation?

Have risks associated with using innovative approaches/solutions been taken into account?

What contingency plans are in place and how would they be activated?

Essential evidence

Risk register with regular updates.

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Risk management – examples from our studies

In our 2016 report Upgrading emergency services communications: the Emergency Services Network (ESN), we reviewed progress to replace the existing system, Airwave, with ESN, one of the most technologically advanced communication systems worldwide. This system had not yet been used, nationwide, anywhere in the world and it was inherently high risk, including risks associated with technical matters, user take-up, and commercial arrangements. We also found there was an overarching risk due to the ambitious nature of the timeline adopted by the programme. Although total failure seemed unlikely at the time of our report, we found that there was a risk that the programme would not be able to overcome its challenges within the cost and/or timetable proposed in the business case, or to the satisfaction of users.

In The London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games: post-Games review we reported that to manage and forecast costs, assessed risks were turned into quantified assessments with financial values attributed to them. A £2.7 billion contingency provision gave a high level of financial cover for the Delivery Authority, with clear procedures for applying for and releasing contingency funds. In this way, cost forecasting, management of risk and management of contingency funds were all aligned. As the programme progressed, the requirement for contingency cover reduced and the funding could be redirected to operational requirements.

As the programme moved from its planning to the operational phase, the government's oversight arrangements changed to reflect the need for quick resolution of any issues that might arise. In the year or so before the Games, there was intensive testing of a range of potential scenarios across the programme, enabling delivery bodies to refine their plans, and identify risks and mitigating actions. For example, when it became clear that G4S could not provide the full number of venue security guards required, effective contingency plans were implemented.

Other relevant reports

Progress with the Road Investment Strategy (paragraph 10)

Delivering value through the apprenticeships programme (paragraphs 17 to 19)

Universal Credit: progress update (paragraph 19)

Update on preparations for smart metering (paragraph 9)

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4 Delivery and variation management

Key audit question

13 Delivery Strategy

Are there appropriate incentives for all parties to deliver (contractual, performance management, or other)?

Sub-questions

Is there evidence that different ways of delivering the programme have been evaluated?

Has the programme been appropriately tendered and contractors/partners using a defensible process?

Is there appropriate sharing of risk and reward between parties?

Are risks owned by the parties best placed to manage them?

See the in-depth tools on Delivery for tools containing more detailed questions on specific delivery strategies. For instance, Commercial and contract management: insights and emerging best practice covers issues with risk transfer.

Essential evidence

The delivery strategy, including a procurement strategy if appropriate.

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Delivery strategy – examples from our studies

In The rural broadband programme we found that this government programme to make superfast broadband available to 90% of premises in each area of the UK was, at the time of reporting in 2013, expected to be delivered nearly two years later than initially planned. The then Department for Culture, Media & Sport designed the programme to promote competition through a procurement framework. In practice, we found that competition was limited. The design of the competitive framework had the advantages of ensuring affordability and transferring risk but a number of features led to potential suppliers withdrawing from the bidding process. Stakeholders told us these features included the funding model, the local nature of procurement contracts, the qualification requirements for prime contractors and unattractive commercial conditions created by regulatory and State Aid conditions.

In Delivering the defence estate (2016) we reviewed whether the Ministry of Defence (MoD) was in a good position to manage its estate and whether it had addressed the barriers identified in our previous reports. In 2011, the Department established the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO) to manage the estate centrally. The objective was to cut costs, drive further rationalisation and create commercial opportunities for using the estate. In 2014, the MoD let a novel contract to a private sector consortium, led by Capita, to become its strategic business partner running DIO and help it deliver savings the Department could not achieve on its own. However, the MoD failed to set contractual safeguards to ensure savings were achieved from operational improvements and there were weaknesses in the key performance indicators regime set in the contract to measure DIO's performance. The MoD also failed to deliver the transformation it expected before the strategic business partner joined DIO, which limited the benefits of the contract.

Other relevant reports

Carbon Capture and Storage: the second competition for government support (paragraphs 14 and 15)

Delivering Carrier Strike (paragraph 19)

E-borders and successor programmes (paragraph 18)

Upgrading emergency services communications: the Emergency Services Network (paragraphs 12 and 14)

Investigation into the South East Flexible Ticketing Programme (paragraphs 1.4 and 1.6)

4 Delivery and variation management

Key audit question

14 Change control

Is there an effective mechanism to control programme alterations?

Sub-questions

Are changes considered in the context of the programme as a whole?

Who has what authority to agree changes (cost, time and quality)?

Essential evidence

Record of changes to definition of the programme (eg changes in scheme design, changing requirements or objectives), and accumulated cost and value-for-money implications.

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Change control – examples from our studies

In our 2009 report The National Offender Management Information System we concluded that the initiative to introduce a single offender management database had been expensive and ultimately unsuccessful. We also concluded that the problems could have been avoided if the National Offender Management Service had established realistic budget, timescales and governance for the project at the start and followed basic project management principles in its implementation. One of our findings was that change control was weak, with no process in place for assessing the cumulative impact of individual change requests on the project budget or delivery timetable. At the start of the project, controls over changes to requirements were weak and informal. In June 2005, an Office of Government Commerce Gateway Review highlighted the need to strengthen these controls, but a Change Control Board did not become fully operational until early 2006. Although a formal change control strategy was in place from August 2005, in line with PRINCE2 methodologies, internal audit found the strategy was not routinely followed.

In our 2015 report Early review of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Delivery Programme we examined how well the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) had managed its programme to develop new systems and processes to support the implementation of the new CAP in England. We concluded that there had been weakness in the clarity of the overarching vision for the programme and level of innovation expected, in the collaboration between the organisations involved, and in the management of competing priorities. We also found a high turnover of senior responsible owners and poor engagement between the delivery partners. As a result, Defra expected higher European Union penalties, increased programme costs, poorer customer experience and difficulties in paying farmers both accurately and at the earliest opportunity.

Defra took action in March 2015, making changes to improve customers' experience and contain the costs. Changes to reduce the difficulties some farmers were facing in applying for subsidies were implemented quickly and effectively. However, the focus on resolving immediate issues diverted attention and resources from longer-term goals and the programme is not expected to fully deliver its initial aims.

Other relevant reports

Universal Credit: progress update (paragraph 19)

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Key audit question

15 Responding to external change

Is the programme sufficiently flexible to deal with setbacks and changes in the operating context?

Sub-questions

Is the programme team aware of any changes in other policies and programmes that impact on the programme?

Has the programme responded to those changes?

Has scenario planning been used to check the programme's assumptions?

Which identified risks have materialised and with what effect?

Essential evidence

Strategies for managing risks and issues, plans and risk register.

Responding to external change – examples from our studies

Our report on the Early review of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Delivery Programme for the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) found that the programme had been subject to a number of disruptive external influences. The application scheme manages access to the European Union (EU) framework of subsidies and rural development programmes. Policies, primarily at the EU level, were finalised late in the development process. This led to delays in finalising the detailed control requirements in England, in some cases until after implementation had started, adding to the complexity of the programme.

The system was also originally intended to use the government's Verify identity assurance system for registration and although a small minority of farmers were able to use this online system, the majority registered using the RPA's existing registration process. The online application system was subsequently withdrawn and replaced by paper-assisted digital applications for the 2015 deadlines.

The London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games: post-Games review highlighted that planning for venue security at the Games did not go smoothly. During 2011, as venue operating plans were finalised, the number of guards required doubled to over 20,000. In turn the Public Sector Funding Package for the Games had to cover additional costs of over £500 million, which was only possible because contingency funds had become available from elsewhere in the programme. Then, just two weeks before the Opening Ceremony, G4S told the Olympic organisers that it would not be able to provide the number of guards it had been contracted to supply. There could have been serious implications from having insufficient security guards. Contingency plans were implemented, additional military and police personnel were rapidly deployed to fill the gap, and the security operation passed off without any major problems.

Other relevant reports

Update on preparations for smart metering (paragraph 8)

Upgrading emergency services communications: the Emergency Services Network (paragraph 17)

Key audit question

16 Performance management

Is progress being measured and assessed including consideration that the programme is still the right thing to do? Are benefits being achieved?

Sub-questions

Does the programme leadership receive regular and timely reports including information on:

- Progress and milestone achievements against plan?
- Reports on individual work packages/streams?
- Resources and funding used to date (and compared to expectation and progress)?
- Confidence in forward plan/updated plan from team and suppliers?

What parameters have been set around the planned performance/delivery of the programme as acceptable?

Is there evidence that action has been taken to address problems?

Does the evidence indicate that the programme is delivering/on track to deliver its objectives and intended benefits?

Is there systematic reporting against clear criteria that reduces reliance on individual judgements?

Are cost and delivery indicators integrated, or at least aligned, to provide an overall value measure?

Essential evidence

Programme dashboard or other reporting on progress of work packages.

Key metrics used to measure progress.

Performance management – examples from our studies

E-borders and successor programmes (2015) found that although data collection and manipulation was at the heart of the programme, the Home Office was weak in this respect. As our earlier reports on border functions had consistently identified weaknesses in the use of data for intelligence and performance monitoring purposes, it was concerning that such deficiencies persisted. Our report found that measures of data quality had only been available to the Home Office since 2014 and these were limited in coverage. Previously, the Home Office focused on collecting greater volumes of data from transport carriers and other government agencies and paid less attention to the quality of these data. With gaps in the management information used by the Home Office, we found it unsurprising that it struggled to produce robust business cases.

In the Crossrail project, the Department for Transport (DfT) had a clear view of Crossrail Limited's progress. Its oversight benefited from:

- its role on the Joint Sponsor Board;
- the presence of a DfT-nominated non-executive director on the board of Crossrail Limited;
- the Project Representative, who reviewed and provided commentary on Crossrail Limited's regular progress reports, as well as carrying out focused reviews of particular aspects of the programme. These reports helped DfT and Transport for London to engage with and challenge Crossrail Limited effectively; and
- clear, high quality monthly and semi-annual reports on progress, which, on the whole, focused on the main issues of interest for sponsors.

Crossrail Limited received detailed information on Network Rail's works, and included a summary of this in its regular reports to sponsors.

Other relevant reports

Early review of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Delivery Programme (paragraph 18)

Investigation: The Department for Transport's funding of the Garden Bridge (paragraph 10)

Modernising the Great Western Railway (paragraph 17)

Preparations for the roll-out of smart meters (paragraph 9)

Progress with preparations for High Speed 2 (paragraphs 8 and 9)

Universal credit: early progress (paragraph 19)

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Key audit question

17 Lessons learned

Is the programme learning from experience on the current programme and previous relevant programmes?

Sub-questions

If the organisation has attempted similar programmes, has it avoided repeating any mistakes made in those programmes?

Is there evidence of learning from programme performance information?

What caused deviations from plan (over/under-runs)? Are these likely to reoccur/knock-on in subsequent stages?

Essential evidence

Evaluation strategy/plans.

Evaluation reports.

Gateway 5.

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Lessons learned – examples from our studies

Following our 2013 report (see page 21) in 2014 we published Universal Credit: progress update. The Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) was replacing six means-tested benefits with a new Universal Credit. In this highly ambitious and challenging transformation programme, DWP struggled during the early development. In early 2013, the Major Projects Authority (now the Infrastructure and Projects Authority), the Committee of Public Accounts, the DWP Select Committee and the NAO all expressed serious concerns about it, leading to a reset of the programme. DWP then adopted a twin-track approach: the development of a digital service while also learning from further roll-out of the live service. DWP believed the additional costs of this approach were justified because it expected Universal Credit to achieve substantial benefits for society sooner and with fewer risks.

As well as learning lessons from its early implementation, DWP has adopted a 'test and learn' approach enabling it to apply lessons from the live service to the development of its digital service, and the Department more widely.

Our 2015 report Reform of the rail franchising programme examined whether the Department for Transport (DfT) had improved its management of its rail franchising programme since it had had to cancel its competition for the InterCity West Coast franchise in 2012 (see page 21). We looked at whether DfT had applied the recommendations from reports by the NAO and others after 2012. We concluded that DfT had improved its management of its rail franchising programme, and that the results of the more recent franchise competitions indicated that, if managed effectively, returns to the taxpayer could be higher than in the past. DfT had established a team to focus on franchise letting and management; improved the transparency, consistency and clarity of information provided to bidders and the public; and strengthened the assurance and governance of franchising. To continue to improve the programme DfT had started to apply lessons learned from completed competitions and feedback from bidders.

Other relevant reports

Helping government learn (paragraph 11)

Planning for 100% local retention of business rates (paragraph 12)

The roll-out of the Jobcentre Plus office network (paragraph 8)

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Key audit question

18 Transition to business as usual

Does the programme have a clear plan for transfer to operations/business as usual?

Sub-questions

Have stakeholders endorsed the requirements for absorbing the programme's aims into ongoing operations?

Is the organisational structure appropriate for the new operational context?

Are revised operational procedures appropriate and in place?

Has responsibility for benefit realisation been allocated to operational business units?

Does the completed programme satisfy the organisation and key stakeholder requirements?

Has sufficient and relevant learning, guidance and experience been migrated from the programme team to the operations team?

Essential evidence

Plan for implementing programme.

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Transition to business as usual – examples from our studies

In Managing the transition to the reformed health system we report on these reforms, regarded as the most wide-ranging and complex since the NHS was created, with more than 170 organisations closed and more than 240 new bodies created. This report in July 2013 found that the transition to the reformed health system was successfully implemented in that the new organisations were ready to start functioning on 1 April 2013, although not all were operating as intended. Some parts of the system were less ready than others, and much remained to be done to complete the transition. Although NHS staff stressed that maintaining the quality of care provided to patients was of paramount importance throughout the transition, assurance that care quality was maintained during this period was limited because little data was available to track the quality of primary care. At the time we reported, the new organisations still needed to assess if the staff they had inherited were affordable and had the right skills. Further changes were expected to be needed.

Our 2017 report Delivering carrier strike found that although this programme has many years still to run, governance arrangements will need to change as the Ministry of Defence (MoD) plans for operational use of Carrier Strike, shifting from a focus on scrutinising the build phase and ensuring coordination between the Commands managing the core Carrier Strike programmes, to use of the new capability. We found that the MoD was introducing new governance arrangements so that those responsible for making decisions on using the capability would be involved in early preparations. We noted that these arrangements could introduce some duplication in the short term, but that they were important for ensuring coordination across the many stakeholders.

Other relevant reports

Early review of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Delivery Programme (paragraph 12)

The London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games: post-Games review (paragraph 6)

Upgrading emergency service communications: the Emergency Services Network (paragraph 16)

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The questions detailed in this framework are the high-level questions to ask about major projects and programmes. The following NAO tools provide further support for examining issues in more depth.

1 Purpose

Delivery Environment Complexity Analytic: Understanding challenges in delivering project objectives	Provides a framework for assessing the context in which outcomes are being delivered. It includes key principles of stakeholder engagement.
Initiating Successful Projects	This 2011 NAO guide sets out key elements of project initiation.

2 Value

Framework to review models	Models generate the information on which a wide range of decisions are formed, from forecasting policy outcomes to estimating the financial feasibility of major infrastructure programmes. This framework is intended to aid those commissioning or undertaking analysis of a model with the aim of determining whether the model is robust and reasonable. It can be used for models of all levels of complexity and business risk.
Over-optimism in government projects	Sets out factors which may lead to optimistic assessment of costs and benefits.

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3 Programme set-up

Delivery Environment Complexity Analytic: Understanding challenges in delivering project objectives	Provides a framework for assessing the context in which outcomes are being delivered.
Lessons from cancelling the InterCity West Coast franchise competition	Paragraph 6 of this report sets out a simple 5-stage model of assurance safeguards.
Assurance for high risk projects	This 2010 report set out the good practice principles that would be present in a mature and effective assurance system.
Lessons from major rail infrastructure programmes	Contains lessons from a variety of programme delivery arrangements.
Managing risks in government	This 2011 good practice guide focuses on organisation-wide risk management, but the principles also apply to managing risks in programmes.
Over-optimism in government projects	Describes the principles of independent scrutiny and covers risks that lead to optimism bias in programmes.

4 Delivery

A Framework for evaluating the implementation of Private Finance Initiative projects	Sets out the issues that need to be considered in evaluating whether PFI projects have been implemented effectively, covering the life cycle of projects from initial strategic analysis to the mature operational phase. Many of the issues considered are applicable to non-PFI programmes.
Performance measurement good practice criteria and maturity model	Pulls together good practice criteria and maturity model from a number of our earlier performance measurement frameworks and 'Choosing the right FABRIC' – guidance published jointly with Audit Commission, Cabinet Office, Office for National Statistics and HM Treasury. Its appendix provides links to a large number of related sources of information on performance measurement.

Continued on next page

Commercial and contracting management: insights and emerging best practice This web-page also includes: NAO contractual relationships audit framework Good practice contract management framework	Based on 100 studies on commercial and contractual issues that we have undertaken since 2000, this interactive document draws out common themes and identifies 20 areas of insight we feel government needs to think about going forward. The insights continue to be identified through our ongoing work and are summarised in this series of blog-posts on contract management.
E-borders and successor programmes	Contains simplified graphics mapping issues encountered by the programme.
Evaluation in government	Cross-government report setting out what the government's evaluation requirements are, the sources of guidance, the extent to which they are followed and the quality of evidence, including a model for assessing the robustness of evaluation evidence.
Helping Government Learn	This 2009 report included 11 case examples of organisational learning in the public sector.
Integration across government	This 2013 report included examples of how key factors affected success of initiatives and why benefits may not be achieved
Lessons for major service transformation	This 2015 briefing outlines 11 lessons for managing service transformation, drawing on our report Welfare reform – lessons learned but also setting out broader principles from our work auditing government programmes and reporting on value for money.
Mental health services: preparations for improving access	This 2016 report used six criteria to assess whether programmes are likely to be implemented successfully.
Modernising the Great Western railway	Figure 9 of this report sets out good practice criteria for assessing performance information provided to the programme board.
Outcome-based payment schemes: government's use of payment by results	Alongside this report is an analytical framework for decision-makers, a toolkit covering the structure, risks and challenges of payment by results schemes and a framework of questions for commissioners to consider.

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