

EFFECTIVE TRANSITION FROM POLICY TO PROGRAMME



This is the third in OGC's series of "Lessons Learned" papers which summarise key points drawn from a range of major government projects and programmes over recent years. There are web-links to practical guidance and tools on the last page.

The early stages

Headline reports about failing government projects and programmes are most often in terms of factors which have arisen since the programme began - huge budget increases, schedule overruns, re-scoping of requirements. Closer examination, however, can reveal fault lines which were present *before* the programme got underway.

The following cases are illustrative:

- Weak planning and design of the Benefits Payments Card programme (DWP) and of management of risk, eventually resulted in the cancellation of the programme and aborted cost of up to £1bn¹.
- A rushed introduction by the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) of a new payments system for farmers - the project started before the specification was complete – actually compounded delay later on, as 23 substantial changes to the computer system had to be made to meet policy and regulatory changes².
- An over-optimistic timetable for development and implementation led to the Criminal Records Bureau going "live" without having tested assumptions about the preferences of customers, which led to costly re-working of process and service delays³.

In each of the cases above, the government acknowledged that early-stage factors had contributed to catastrophic failure much later on, and more generally, has recognised the value of planning carefully and involving delivery partners prior to implementation.

Where the link between good policy-making and operational delivery has been tackled effectively and early, the chances of successful programme delivery are enhanced. For example, DWP found it possible in their child support reforms, to simplify the payments system without detriment to the beneficiaries, enabling a reduction in the complexity, and hence the costs and risks, of IT development and support⁴.

The importance of careful and thorough planning [...] is sound advice which the government takes seriously [...]"
Government response to "Achieving vfm in the delivery of public services", January 2006.

¹ "Government IT projects" – Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, July 2003

² "The delays in administering the 2005 Single Payment System in England" Public Accounts Committee report, September 2007, and government response November 2007

³ "Criminal Records Bureau: delivering safer recruitment?" Public Accounts Committee report October 2004 and government response January 2005

⁴ Third Report, Works and Pensions Select Committee July 2004 "Management of information technology projects: making IT delivery for DWP customers"

The other early-stage determinant of eventual programme success is the quality of initial set-up. There is a mass of evidence, including that above, which links the likelihood of benefits realisation to the strength of the governance, resources and processes which were put in place at the outset. Positive examples include the introduction of the Businesslink.gov portal introduced by the Small Business Service (the DTI, now BERR) and DWP's new Pension Credit scheme⁵.

Lesson 1 - Poorly designed policy and/or bad initial programme set-up are root causes of programme failure.

Applied learning

Although major government programmes are intrinsically difficult to deliver, failure is not inevitable, and departments can learn from experience – good and bad.

DWP effectively applied learning from the aborted Benefits Payments Card to achieve success in the Payments Modernisation Programme, for example, by ensuring a rigorous risk management process was in place. This programme successfully introduced a system for paying benefits and entitlements directly into bank accounts. It was to budget and well within the timescale, enabling cost savings of over £1bn over the business case period.

The Identity and Passport Service (IPS) applied learning from a number of less successful projects where poor planning had hampered delivery, including the Passport Agency (its predecessor body) and the set-up of the Criminal Records Bureau. Careful planning from the outset enabled the IPS to deliver an electronic passport to time, cost and quality standards, and was commended by the public accounts committee⁶.

“Learning from experience is not just a case of appreciating what went wrong, but also encompasses understanding of what went right.”

NAO, “Managing Successful IT-enabled business change”, November 2006

Building on lessons learned, a new Policy Directorate, jointly staffed by Defra and the Rural Payments Agency under a Defra deputy director, was established to improve the integration of policy formulation for the Single Payment Scheme with the implementation capability of the agency. There are new ways of working, with policy assumptions logged as a record for joint management and sign-off with Defra, with subsequent changes subject to review and assessment of business impact.

There are a number of guides to good practice and stores of “lessons learned” – but lead officials need know where to look, and to seek them out. Departmental PPM Centres of Excellence are one likely source, for example the Home Office publishes a range of “lessons learnt” on its intranet. The NAO and Public Accounts Committee have both published learning from a range of failed, and successful, projects and programmes⁷.

Lesson 2 - Project teams which explicitly set out to learn from past mistakes are more likely to achieve success in major new initiatives.

Collaboration

Departmental Capability Reviews have exposed the scale and complexity of the delivery challenges. The next phase will place more emphasis on achieving consistent and dynamic collaboration both within and across organisational boundaries, and on translating improved departmental performance into improved services to the general public.

The challenge of achieving the intended outcomes of government projects is accentuated by long and complex policy-to-delivery chains. Not only are policy and delivery teams rarely in the same management unit, they may well be geographically separate and in different organisations, whether this is an Agency or NDPB (Non-Departmental Public Body), or through local authorities, other public sector bodies or outsourced supplier.

⁵ “Delivering Successful IT-enabled business change”, National Audit Office report, November 2006

⁶ Committee of Public Accounts, “Identity and Passport Service: the introduction of e-passports”, published July 2007

⁷ See for example, “Delivering Successful IT-enabled business change” NAO, November 2006; “Achieving Value for money in the delivery of public services”, PAC December 2005 and the government response, January 2006; “Helping Government Learn” NAO, February 2009

PPM (Programme and Project Management) Centres of Excellence in departments were established in 2003 as a key means of supporting senior management in implementing a project management approach to delivery to realise benefits⁸. The PPM community today continues to have an important role in identifying, as well as supervising, high-risk programmes including those which are linked to cross-cutting Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets.

The potential benefits of collaborative working are well recognised although the barriers can appear formidable. Governance arrangements should include delivery partners as early as practicable. That way, critical issues requiring business change and stakeholder engagement and support, can be built into delivery plans early on.

“Involving those who have to implement and evaluate a policy in its design is key to assessing how practical a policy is likely to be.”

NAO report, “Modern policy-making: ensuring policies deliver value-for-money”, November 2001.

The development of a cross-government framework to prepare all sectors for handling a ‘flu pandemic has been cited as a strong example of good practice, with an inclusive approach to policy development and determined project management being key components of success⁹.

The Cabinet Office achieved this by bringing together all the major stakeholders to achieve a shared understanding of what was required.

Lesson 3 - Collaborative working is hard, but it is essential to achieve outcomes in complex programmes which involve multiple delivery partners.

The PPM community has an important role in strengthening collaborative working with those leading on policy development and strategy in their departments, in order to achieve the desired benefits from high-risk delivery programmes.

Standing back

It is generally accepted that, although assurance cannot guarantee successful programme delivery, its proportionate and systematic use will identify flaws which can be addressed before they become fatal. It is complementary to other tools designed to turn policy into deliverable benefits (such the “Delivering Policy

The effort put in at the beginning pays dividends.”

Sir Alan Cockshaw, Chair, Major Projects’ Association Seminar, November 2008

“A stitch in time, saves nine.”
Proverb

Workshop” jointly developed by OGC and the National School for Government, and the Home Office’s P2D workshop).

Assurance should start during the policy development stage, and ideally well before the implementation programme is underway. For example, the Home Office is developing an Early Engagement Framework, with its P2D workshop among the suite of tools available.

External assurance can add important new insights to internal control, as well as an independent perspective. It may in some cases act as a catalyst for lead departments to bring together the different elements of the policy-to-delivery chain.

OGC is contributing to the enhancement of assurance available to departments by building in a “delivery confidence” assessment into its well-established Gateway review process and developing a new assurance tool, OGC *Starting Gate*, tailored for the earlier, pre-Gateway stages of the policy-to-delivery life-cycle.

In the most high risk, contentious cases, both internal and external assurance may be proportionate and necessary. An integrated approach to assurance which selects the right tool at the right time will enhance the prospects of the implementation programme achieving the intended policy outcomes.

Lesson 4 - Assurance is beneficial from the early stages of the policy-to-delivery lifecycle.

The PPM community has a key role in encouraging the take-up of internal and external assurance.

⁸ Improving Project and Programme Delivery” Office of Public Services Delivery Reform (Cabinet Office) 2003

⁹ Collaborative working across government”, COI Strategic Consultancy, published by the Cabinet Office, May 2008

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Want to know more?

The web-links listed below lead to established reference materials which have advice and “how to” guidance relevant to these lessons.

If you have suggestions for future subjects you would like us to report on, then please contact the OGC Service Desk as shown at the end of this bulletin.

- Better policy-making
http://www.nationalschool.gov.uk/policyhub/better_policy_making/joined_up.asp
- Stakeholder mapping
www.ogc.gov.uk/documentation_and_templates_stakeholder_issues_stakeholder_map.asp
- Early Risk management (including guidance and tools)
http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/early_management_of_risks.htm
- Economic assessment www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/data_greenbook_index.htm
- Setting up projects and programmes http://www.ogc.gov.uk/ppm_resource_toolkit.asp

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