Lessons Learned
Effective Project Assurance

OGC

Project assurance helps manage risk and improves delivery confidence. Project assurance supports SROs and others responsible for successful delivery whilst providing funders and other stakeholders with the confidence that the project can deliver to time, budget and quality. All projects – be they procurements, property developments, policy initiatives or business change schemes – benefit from independent challenge and, therefore, all organisations should have in place an effective framework to provide a suitable level of assurance for their portfolio of programmes and projects.

Project assurance provides organisation-wide visibility of the project portfolio and an agreed view of risk, and is key to the learning and dissemination of lessons. OGC Gateway™ Reviews are important for assuring major projects and programmes, but should be only one element within a comprehensive assurance framework. OGC Gateway Reviews themselves often consider the findings of other assurance activities and, in turn, often feed into further assurance activities.

What does OGC's experience tell us about how to make project assurance effective? Four things stand out: good planning, starting early, sharing assurance outputs and acting on recommendations.

Quotations are from recent OGC Gateway™ Review and Starting Gate reports.

Planning assurance: tools, time, people, place…

Regular assurance is important to the successful delivery of projects, providing an independent challenge, bringing in expertise external to the project and helping identify major risks. Assurance can provide comfort that a project is on track to deliver or, conversely, identify remedial action required or even recommend that a project be halted or re-baselined.

> *"The Programme Team has sought to make full use of assurance mechanisms. In addition, there is an intention to engage an external SRO "critical friend". The review team endorses this plan and supports the general ethos of assurance best practice being employed."*

All projects should have their own costed and resourced assurance plan and this needs to be proportionate with the complexity of and risks associated with the project. A range of assurance is usually required, which may include internal assurance and other departmental processes, OGC Gateway and, for some of the largest projects, Major Projects Review Group and NAO scrutiny. This requires the mapping of a project's assurance needs throughout the project lifecycle and identifying the resources needed and the potential sources for providing them. Only by mapping out a single assurance plan can the project look for assurance synergies and avoid assurance overload.

Effective project assurance requires senior management commitment to undertaking assurance activities and to acting on recommendations. Getting the right SRO, with seniority and experience commensurate with the priority, complexity and risks of the project, is key to having an effective assurance regime.

Don't underestimate the time required to make the most of assurance – from scheduling and arranging appropriate assurance events to ensuring that recommendations are acted on and lessons shared.

Lesson 1: All projects should have their own assurance plan.

What's the assurance for? Is it an in-depth look at a technical issue? A more rounded look at the overall project's health? Scrutiny of readiness to proceed to the next project stage? Understanding the purpose of the assurance is essential for identifying appropriately skilled and experienced individuals to provide the assurance.

> *"We believe the project will benefit from a health-check taking place in June/July of 2009 when the new supplier will be embedded and the delivery organisation in place."*

Be aware of the extent and limitation of the various review processes. OGC Gateway™ Reviews are but one form of project assurance amongst many. Others are internal audits, healthchecks, "deep dives", the use of Critical Friends and the assurance of action plans. An OGC Gateway Review provides a snapshot view of progress, at a point in time and, therefore should be seen as complementary to other assurance activities. For example, having an OGC Gateway Review does not replace the need for a full audit opinion on the effectiveness of risk management, control and governance, and OGC Gateways are not typically timed to assure supplier selection as Gate 2 may be too early and Gate 3 too late. No assurance process is a substitute for a rigorous and accountable project governance framework.

> **Lesson 2:   Use the right assurance tool at the right time, provided by appropriately skilled and experience assurors.**

When to start?

A comprehensive and integrated suite of assurance activities across an organisation provides visibility of the project portfolio, with an assessment of its overall health, and the opportunity to take action where required. Assurance can add value throughout the project lifecycle – and even pre-lifecycle. An early start to assurance activities allows business requirements to be effectively assured and may offer opportunities to share existing solutions. The new OGC Starting Gate applies at the early stages of the policy-to-delivery lifecycle and is undertaken before a programme or project has formally been commenced. To quote from the OGC Lessons

Learned on *The Effective Transition from Policy to Programme*:

> *"Where the link between good policy-making and operational delivery has been tackled effectively, the chances of successful programme delivery are enhanced."*

> *"We found the OGC Starting Gate process very helpful in providing some external challenge at a key stage of the programme as we prepare for the delivery phase."*

This does require that all projects and programmes – and potential projects and programmes – are identified at an early stage and an assurance plan put in place.

> **Lesson 3:   The right assurance at the right time always adds value: start the assurance early, and consider using a Starting Gate.**

Sharing the findings

To have maximum impact the outcome and recommendations of assurance activities need to be shared across the wider project team and, in many cases, further afield to those affected by the project. Not sharing can lead, for instance, to decisions being made in ignorance of the findings of assurance activities or can mean that stakeholders may be unaware of why changes to the project are being proposed, possibly leading to delay and opposition to those proposed changes. Sharing and reviewing the outputs of assurance activities underpins an effective integrated assurance model, and maintaining an integrated assurance log can be a useful tool.

In a similar vein, the outcomes and recommendations from assurance should be escalated to the level where appropriate remedial actions can be sanctioned. For example, copies of reports on IT-enabled projects should be sent to the CIO and sharing reports with suppliers allows for a joint approach to tackling emerging problems and issues. The aim is not to create a report-copying process but instead to ensure that the appropriate people in organisations are aware of

issues arising and problems identified and are able to take the requisite action.

Of course one size doesn't fit all, and sharing and escalation procedures need to fit the organisational environment.

> **Lesson 4:** **Organisations should develop and declare a policy setting out when and to whom assurance reports should be circulated.**

Pooling and analysing the findings from assurance activities is an effective way of generating "Lessons Learned" reports. The current series of OGC Gateway™ Review Lesson Learned is one example of that, the "Common Causes of Project Failure" is another. All projects can benefits from the experiences of others.

On a similar note, assurors working across an organisation can provide a valuable organisation-wide assurance perspective. Organisations are encouraged to ensure adequate and timely coordination and sharing of information, including plans, between the various review functions.

> **Lesson 5:** **Reap the benefits of assurance activities by sharing and learning from others.**

Acting on recommendations

Assurance without appropriate and effective follow-up action is valueless. This doesn't mean automatically accepting all recommendations made, but it does imply the careful consideration of those recommendations.

OGC is aware of Departments where Gateway Review recommendations are recorded centrally by the Centre of Excellence and progress monitored. The new OGC "Assurance of Action Plans" process provides a structured response to high-risk Gateway Reviews where delivery confidence is Red or Amber/Red.

> *"This review should be followed up using the Assurance of Action Plans (AAP) process managed by OGC."*

Carrying out effective follow-up actions is closely linked to the circulation and escalation of assurance reports – having top-of-the office and stakeholder understanding and support can be crucial.

> **Lesson 6:** **Act on the recommendations and use circulation and escalation procedures where appropriate.**

Want to know more?

If you would like to find out more on the lessons from Effective Project Assurance or 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.

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