



National Audit Office

Joint Targets

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS



1 Joint working can help to improve the delivery of public services, many of which require Departments to work across organisational boundaries. Its importance is reflected in the growth in the number of joint Public Service Agreement targets. Achieving joint targets has not been easy, as they address difficult problems. They present challenges, particularly with regard to the setting of objectives and priorities; developing a common understanding amongst partners of how to achieve the target they share, and their respective roles and responsibilities; implementing appropriate working arrangements and monitoring and reporting performance. We examined the use of joint targets in the international field (**Figure 1**). This part summarises our findings and identifies some key characteristics of effective joint working.

The value of joint targets

2 For joint targets to be effective, partners need a shared understanding of the target and its implications. For the targets we examined, Departments had this shared understanding. Joint targets in the international field had been particularly useful in signalling to external stakeholders the UK's intent and commitment on important policy issues.

3 In technical terms, the targets need to be better defined. In one case the target was originally narrowly defined, so that even if the target was achieved the objective might not be met. In other cases, the target was so broadly drawn that identifying any UK contribution to progress would be problematic. And certain targets were weak when it came to specifying the level of performance to be achieved.

4 Departmental staff told us that the introduction of joint targets had provided a stimulus to joint working, and increased motivation. The targets had less impact on the pattern of activities undertaken. They had limited value in terms of driving how Departments organised themselves to meet the target; and how they worked with each other. To varying degrees, Departments had been working together in the areas relevant to the objectives prior to the introduction of each joint target we reviewed and we found that working arrangements rarely changed significantly with the introduction of the targets. The exception was the Conflict Prevention target, although here changes to working arrangements were driven as much by the need to manage pooled budgets as by the introduction of the joint target.

Planning the delivery of joint targets

5 Treasury guidance suggests that Departments should adopt a staged approach to planning for target achievement – understanding the desired outcomes, establishing the factors which can influence results, finding out what interventions will work best, and then securing appropriate delivery partners. We reviewed the partners' planning arrangements for the joint targets in the international field.

6 At the strategic level, we found some common strengths, including clarification of the purpose of United Kingdom policy in the areas targeted; good high-level evidence of the advantages of change; a clear understanding of the main factors affecting change; and structural innovations, such as pooled budgets for conflict prevention, which offered the prospects of a more effective response. Joint targets had helped secure a coherent approach from the formal partners to the target.

1 Joint targets examined and the Departments formally responsible for delivery

Target

Improved effectiveness of the United Kingdom contribution to conflict prevention and management (**the Conflict Prevention target**).

Ensuring that three-quarters of all eligible Heavily Indebted Poor Countries committed to poverty reduction receive irrevocable debt relief by 2006 (**the Debt Relief target**).

Work with international partners to make progress towards the United Nations 2015 Millennium Development Goals (**the Millennium Development Goals target**).

Secure agreement by 2005 to a significant reduction in trade barriers leading to improved trading opportunities for the United Kingdom and developing countries (**the Trade Barriers target**).

Departments formally responsible for delivery

DFID; Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence

DFID; Treasury

DFID; Treasury

Department of Trade and Industry;
DFID and Foreign Office

Source: DFID's 2003-06 Public Service Agreement

7 But we also identified some limits to Departments' understanding of how best to exploit the strategic opportunities provided by joint working. Partners had not followed Treasury advice in a formal way. While partners had analysed some options for action, we found no high-level maps or models designed explicitly to drive partners' actions and co-ordinate joint working and so make intervention effective. For example, in most cases, the range of potential factors influencing results and their interaction, were not fully developed. Without this information it had proven difficult to set stretching but achievable targets. In the case of the Conflict Prevention target, where difficulties exist in establishing a high-level model of causality applicable to all conflicts, Departments have assessed the drivers, interactions between trends and events, and issues which determined the risk of conflict for individual conflicts.

8 The joint targets we examined are not easily achieved and, given their international focus, the targets require partners to influence other stakeholders rather than deliver services. Partners told us that the complexity of the situations they faced, a lack of good information, and the need to maintain flexibility in response to changing circumstances, militated against formal mapping or modelling exercises. We agree that different circumstances might give rise to different depths of analysis and the need to introduce different planning arrangements to differing degrees. But we note that the circumstances of these targets are too complicated to analyse satisfactorily without some formal tools – there are too many factors in play, some controllable, some influenceable, some entirely external to partners, to maintain an accurate view of their significance through unstructured means alone. In addition, a degree of formality in the mapping of relevant factors helps cement a common partnership view, and reduces the chance of misunderstandings within the partnership.

9 The approach taken at the strategic level also affected more detailed delivery planning. Departments had established plans to guide their work under these targets, in accordance with Treasury requirements, but these often had a single Department focus. Partners had discussed their planned responses, and ensured their plans were coherent. But such plans were rarely produced after joint planning had identified the shape and extent of joint endeavours, and then the relevant aspects of those endeavours taken into single Department plans. Even where joint plans did exist, there were not always joint assessments of issues such as risk. And the quality and joint definition of key intermediate indicators and milestones towards the overall target were variable.

10 To some degree the totality of Departmental resources and efforts could be said to contribute to target achievement. For example, DFID's overarching aim is to contribute to achieving the Millennium Development Goals; and one of the Ministry of Defence's objectives is strengthening international peace and security with its obvious relevance to conflict prevention. However, in terms of those resources more directly employed by Departments to achieve joint targets, it was difficult to determine from individual plans whether those resources were appropriate to achieve targets. Plans did not summarise the overall programme and administrative resources brought to bear on joint targets. And the resources used tended to be those which were already committed to the general policy area rather than as a result of a conscious process of determining the level of resources needed. With the exception of Conflict Prevention, where resources were set at levels Departments felt represented a reasonable UK contribution to a wider effort, there was little programme expenditure – most influencing activity required only modest staff resources. No staff had been given the responsibility or an explicit budget to facilitate joint working.

Monitoring and reporting progress

11 Progress against the targets examined, or elements of them, has been mixed to date. Of the eight aspects of performance measured across the four targets, in December 2004 DFID reported that five were 'on course', in two it was 'too early to say' whether the intended performance would be achieved, and on one that 'slippage' had occurred. Where joint targets were expressed around quantitative indicators, partners drew on the same sources in assessing and reporting progress. But reporting of progress varied between partners: we found several instances where progress had been assessed in a different sense – one partner claiming that they were 'on track' while another thought there was 'slippage'. And in further instances partners reported in different, if not inconsistent terms.

12 This circumstance reflects in part the absence, for some of the targets examined, of joint delivery plans, with the result that partners assessed progress by reference to their own delivery plans. The degree to which individual delivery plans contained interim milestones to assist monitoring varied widely. More generally, the lack of causal maps or models made it more difficult to assess the significance of any deviation from plans.

13 Partners had a variety of working groups and similar fora to consider progress, and devise an agreed response to emerging events. These worked well in building and maintaining relations between the partners – and in a few cases, there were explicit mechanisms to resolve disagreements. There were, however, few formal joint governance arrangements outside of the arrangements set up for the Conflict Prevention Pools. And there was no single “project manager” designated for any of the targets we examined.

Characteristics of effective joint working

14 Our examination has highlighted approaches and degrees of joint working which vary between Departments. We have identified strengths as well as examples where changes in approach could lead to more effective joint working. More generally, best practice in joint working has the following characteristics:

- an understanding of the circumstances in which the achievement of a shared objective is best served by establishing a joint target;
- joint targets designed so that, if met, they will satisfy underlying objectives;
- the setting and renewal of joint targets being informed by analysis of the factors which influence success; the actions needed to make progress happen; and the links between action and achievement;
- joint planning arrangements which balance the greater costs of more sophisticated and formal arrangements against their potential benefits, bearing in mind the factors set out in Figure 15 of this report;
- joint delivery plans, developed and agreed between all Departments formally accountable for delivery, which include interim performance indicators or milestones to assist periodic monitoring of progress;
- resourcing based on knowing what works, having identified the costs and benefits of the options for interventions, and set at a level geared to target achievement;

- Departments who are not formal partners in the joint targets but are nevertheless crucial to target achievement setting out their commitment to taking appropriate action, possibly in their Business Plan or a separate agreement with the joint partners; and
- joint monitoring and reporting arrangements, which allow partners to describe their own contribution to joint targets in their performance reports in a way which meets their own local requirements, but also enables performance against the Public Service Agreement target itself to be reported consistently across the partners.

Role of the centre

15 The centre is engaged in promoting joint working across Departments in a number of ways. For example, supporting cross-cutting reviews, identifying opportunities for joint working and agreeing joint targets as part of the Spending Review process, co-ordinating joint working (in the case of one of the joint targets examined here) and monitoring progress of joint initiatives. It can encourage the adoption of best practice by:

- the Treasury ensuring that the specification of joint targets reflects agreement between all the partners and promoting the value of joint delivery planning among the owners of a joint target;
- the Treasury, with the support of the Cabinet Office, facilitating the co-ordination of Departmental planning, monitoring and reporting timetables to support joint processes; and
- the Treasury and the Cabinet Office providing advice to Departments on ways to best organise joint working arrangements, on the basis of an understanding of what has worked well.