



National Audit Office

# Helping Government Learn

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# CONTENTS

<b>SUMMARY</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>PART ONE</b>	
Organisational learning in government	9
<b>PART TWO</b>	
Case Examples in organisational learning	15
<b>PART THREE</b>	
What departments and the centre of government are doing to support learning	38
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
1 Methodology	48
2 Self Assessment Framework	50
<b>GLOSSARY</b>	<b>54</b>



# SUMMARY

## Why learning is important

**1** To achieve value for money in public services, departments need to learn from success and failure. The Comptroller and Auditor General and the Committee of Public Accounts have examined many instances where major programmes and projects have been either frustrated, or severely hampered, by failure to take on board lessons from their own past experiences or those of others. The Cabinet Office and other organisations at the centre of government have also concluded, following their own reviews, that government departments need to improve their capacity to learn. For example, a summary of recent Capability Reviews argued:

*“the Reviews have shown that there is scope for improved learning and sharing across departments and their delivery chains. It is important that good practice spreads across the Civil Service.”*

**2** This report examines how departments could be better at learning. Learning occurs in many ways. Staff can gain insights and experience from simply doing their work, whilst training can help in developing new skills and knowledge. Feedback from customers and timely analysis of complaints can help drive improvements, and comparisons with the actions of other organisations can act as a stimulus to do things in new or innovative ways. Departments can also benefit from advice and guidance from central bodies such as the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury, as well as from the insights provided by evaluations, audits and scrutiny exercises.

**3** Organisations that are successful at learning tend to share certain characteristics. Above all, their senior management actively support and encourage learning, and their staff are incentivised and given time to think about how to improve personal performance and that of their organisation. Accumulated knowledge is readily accessible and acted upon to avoid similar mistakes being repeated.

## How we undertook this study

**4** We gathered evidence for this report in a number of ways. We examined 11 case examples of learning in a wide range of public sector settings. The case studies were selected because they provided examples of where time and resources have been devoted to learning, leading to improvements in service delivery. The examples in **Box 1 on pages 6 and 7** provide important learning points that are transferable across departments and should signal to those responsible for leading change in departments that greater time and effort devoted to learning can help secure value for money in the delivery of public services.

**5** The report also considers why learning is not always widespread, based on interviews across government and a survey of all central departments. It examines the main barriers to learning and the role that the departments that make up the centre can play in supporting the development of organisational learning. We also drew on a wide range of other evidence sources, including a literature review and consultation with a panel of experts and practitioners in leading organisational learning in the public sector.

## What we found

**6** **There is scope for leaders in departments to give greater priority to learning.** Opportunities include, for example, giving it a higher profile at management boards, and including commitment to learning in competency and assessment frameworks of senior staff. Nearly 90 per cent of management boards do not discuss learning from their activities frequently, a third do not have a member of the board responsible for reporting on organisational learning, and only half of departments have ‘contribution to organisational learning’ within their competency framework for senior civil servants.

**7** **The main barriers to learning experienced by departments are silo structures, ineffective mechanisms to support learning, a high turnover within the workforce and a lack of time for learning.** Learning successfully requires a shift in how people approach their day to day work, and devoting time to learning needs to be valued through greater use of incentives and rewards in departments.

**8** **Programme and Project Management Centres of Excellence have yet to realise their full potential to contribute to organisational learning.** For example, only a quarter of Centres of Excellence prepare an annual report on the lessons learnt in their department’s experience of delivering programmes and projects, and the majority of Centres report to their departmental board sporadically or not at all.

**9** **Central departments, in particular, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury, have an important role to play in promoting learning across government.** Their work gives them insight into what works well and where common causes of failure lie. While departments are aware of the support the centre provides and value its role in establishing and supporting cross-departmental networks, they report that these organisations need to develop a better understanding of departmental delivery issues, and there is scope for a rationalisation of the guidance and support tools provided.

**10** **Departments find cross-departmental networks and communities of practice most valuable to supporting learning.** The developing professional networks, some supported by the centre, such as the Chief Technology Officers’ Council and the Change Directors’ Network, provide a good platform for the sharing of knowledge and experience.

## BOX 1: CASE EXAMPLES OF INITIATIVES TO ENCOURAGE LEARNING

**A ePassports** were successfully introduced in 2006, meeting the US visa waiver deadline, while at the same time keeping within existing service delivery agreements. The Identity and Passport Service learnt from its traumatic experience of introducing new systems in 1999, and made good use of the disciplined application of programme and project management processes.

### Key lessons:

- Those leading projects need to be fully committed to the rigorous application of existing programme and project tools.
- Setting expectations for management teams to incorporate lessons learnt into their planning and delivery helps address the risk of knowledge being acquired and shared, but not applied.

**B The Productive Ward programme** in hospitals has generated some encouraging early results. The NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement has seen significant reductions in the time taken to dispense drugs to patients, patient handover times and meal wastage, as well as fewer complaints.

### Key lessons:

- Learning initiatives work best when they meet genuine demands from the frontline.
- Learning guidance and tools work best when they are developed with, rather than simply for, users.

**C The overall response to the 2007 outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease** was successful, with performance, taken as a whole, much improved when compared to the 2001 outbreak (particularly contingency planning), with many of the lessons identified from the earlier outbreak having been acted upon.

### Key lessons:

- Continuity in evaluation and inquiry teams enhances effectiveness in learning from reviews.
- Learning gained in one department can be applicable across government as a whole and should be shared.

**D The Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman's** annual report identifies that there is considerable scope for departments to **learn more from complaints**. The Department for Work and Pensions, health and social care organisations, HMRC and the Independent Police Complaints Commission have systems to learn from complaints, but in some cases better coordination would enable lessons to be applied more effectively.

### Key lessons:

- Learning from complaints happens best when there are systems to capture and analyse what people are complaining about, thereby drawing out significant themes.
- If complaints systems are too complicated, or if people feel their complaint will not make a difference, they are likely not to complain, and hence their insights into service problems will be lost.

**E The Department for International Development** has initiated systems and processes that help it **learn from staff and its wider service delivery chain** for tackling AIDS and HIV. This learning has strengthened the HIV and AIDS strategy, helping to target resources more effectively and strengthen partnerships with non-governmental organisations.

### Key lessons:

- Learning from all partners across the delivery chain is critical to the development of an effective strategy.
- Intranets can provide an effective means for sharing information and learning, particularly where organisations are geographically dispersed. However, this learning is made more effective by bringing staff together as well.

**F The Capability Building Programme** brings together people with relevant expertise from different departments to tackle cross-government issues. In this way departments receive support and challenge from teams with broad and in depth experience from across government. The first pilot, which focused on evidence based policy making at the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, has helped the department to develop new and innovative approaches.

### Key lessons:

- Bringing together people from different departments broadens and deepens the pool of knowledge and experience, enhancing learning.
- Cross-government initiatives work best when there is a well designed and structured process that provides a platform for learning and knowledge transfer.

**G HMRC's Angels and Dragons** initiative allows front line staff to pitch improvements to business processes to the management board. The scheme cost £2.5 million to set up and has £1 million annual running costs, but is designed to achieve a minimum return on investment of 110 per cent over two years.

### Key lessons:

- Senior leaders championing and supporting learning initiatives is essential if staff suggestion initiatives are not to be seen as just a gimmick.
- Linking initiatives to a measurable return on investment helps bring legitimacy and cultural change, developing greater entrepreneurial spirit.

## BOX 1: CASE EXAMPLES OF INITIATIVES TO ENCOURAGE LEARNING *CONTINUED*

**H** The **United States Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Assistance in collaboration with the Center for Court Innovation (a non-governmental organisation)** has brought together law enforcement officials from across the United States to conduct candid assessments of what is working, and what is not working in the United States criminal justice system. Leaders provide grant money for new experiments across the justice community to strengthen performance, informed by these learning 'round tables'.

### Key lessons:

- Learning from failure requires a commitment to creating opportunities where problems can be discussed openly without resorting to "finger pointing" and defensiveness.
- The challenge of moving towards this level of openness within public sector organisations should not be underestimated.

**I** **OGC Gateway reviews** are considered by departments to be effective in providing external challenge and input to project and programme delivery efforts. Over 2,500 reviews have been completed to date. The reviews have been a catalyst for the newly established Major Projects Portfolio report, which is gathering together the key themes emerging from the top 40 major government projects and programmes and Gateway reviews.

### Key lessons:

- When taken together, reviews and evaluations of a large number of individual programmes can inform wider decision making and learning across departments.
- Central bodies such as the OGC have a pool of knowledge about what works well and where risks to delivery lie. Departments have much to gain from actively seeking and learning from such evidence.

**J** The **Beacon Scheme** has been effective in identifying and sharing good practice across local government. Sixty nine per cent of those who attended a Beacon event implemented at least one change they attributed to their engagement with the scheme, and the scheme has boosted confidence and delivery across local government.

### Key lessons:

- Acquiring the right knowledge is a strategic task; it rarely falls into an organisation's lap. There is value in reflecting on where knowledge gaps exist and how these can be filled.
- Learning from others works best when learning is adapted to local conditions.

**K** **Parliamentary scrutiny** conducted by Select Committees is a major component of the external evaluation of government departments. For example, the Science and Technology Committee report on the Use of Science in International Development Policy served to raise the profile of the science agenda across government. The 2005 Committee of Public Accounts report *Achieving value for money in the delivery of public services*, drew together learning from the Committee's work from over ten years of scrutinising government programmes, projects and initiatives.

### Key lessons:

- Focused and timely inquiries which address key issues for a department can hold considerable value where the committee and department interact and reflect on findings.
- Examples marshalled from across government illustrate how inhibitors to efficiency and barriers to effectiveness are often similar in nature and their associated lessons are highly transferable.



## Conclusion on value for money

Past reports by the National Audit Office, the Committee of Public Accounts and others have identified failures in the delivery of public services that could have been avoided if more learning had taken place. As our case studies show, there is effective learning in departments, but overall the evidence also indicates that learning is not yet sufficiently embedded within departments' working practices, nor is it prioritised as much as it should be. Learning often occurs following a crisis or high profile failure, but departments will be more effective at learning when it becomes a more habitual aspect of everyday working practice. Until then, learning within departments will be constrained and failures will continue to happen, leading to avoidable waste, inefficient practices and ineffective services.

## Recommendations

- i** **Four-fifths of departmental management boards discuss how the organisation is learning only "sometimes" or "rarely", and only two thirds have a member responsible for organisational learning, or a strategy linking learning to the delivery of business objectives.** Management boards should assess their organisation's current status in terms of capability to learn from itself and others, using either our self-assessment checklist (Appendix 2) or a similar method, as the basis for a structured discussion to identify strengths and weaknesses, and benchmark themselves against good practice. This analysis will allow departments to identify actions for improved organisational learning.
- ii** **Much learning in government occurs following large projects, initiatives or crises, but to be more effective, learning needs to become a part of day to day practice.** Encouraging learning as a routine element of an organisation's work requires departments and their staff to change behaviours. **Box 2** highlights a number of ways of shifting the culture within departments.
- iii** **There are few incentives to encourage staff to devote more time to learning and reflection on what has gone well or not well with their work. Nearly half of departments do not have learning as part of their competency framework for senior staff.** Departments should build learning into their reward and incentives schemes to communicate more clearly the value of learning and create the expectations that teams will draw lessons from their experiences. Departments should reward those who are seen to demonstrate the types of behaviours summarised above, and they should include 'contribution to learning' as a core competency against which Senior Civil Servants are appraised.

- iv** **Departments find much of the support and guidance from the centre useful, but are confused as to which units and organisations they should approach.** The Cabinet Office and the Treasury should build on the Compact agreed with departments in 2008, by translating its principles into a clear, timetabled programme of action. The objectives should be to create a streamlined centre which is able to justify its interventions on business grounds and develop ways of measuring the added value of central initiatives.
- v** **There has been a proliferation of toolkits, guidance and other products to help government learn. These have been useful but there is a danger of guidance overload.** Led by the Civil Service Steering Board, the centre should rationalise the guidance and support on offer, based on a robust assessment of what departments find most useful and effective. The National Audit Office will also review the toolkits, guidance and support it offers to departments in the light of this conclusion.

### BOX 2

#### Key ways to shift departmental cultures towards learning

- 1 Make staff feel it is safe to speak up about failure and new ideas, for example, by having discussions about specific problem projects.
- 2 Give staff sufficient time to learn and reflect on the way they carry out their work and how it could be done better.
- 3 Encourage the sharing of knowledge within the organisation and discourage knowledge hoarding by teams.
- 4 Reward the generation of new ideas and an inquiring approach, as well as the successful completion of projects.
- 5 Encourage face to face collaboration through networks and through training in team skills.
- 6 Institutionalise the systematic reflection on performance after projects, even if it means delaying moving on to the next project for a while.
- 7 Make sure that learning from consultants is captured before they end their contact with the organisation, and include knowledge transfer in the terms of the contract.
- 8 Acknowledge that work processes are constantly evolving, and that small improvements and constant experimentation are to be expected.
- 9 In communicating the value of learning activity to staff, use language that is most likely to appeal to those involved.