Improving operational delivery in government:

A summary guide for senior leaders

NAO

National Audit Office

Who it is for

This is a practical guide for senior leaders in organisations that contribute to providing government services. These include accounting officers, chief executives, director generals, directors and chief operating officers, and people responsible for specific services or operations.

How it helps

Government is experiencing a unique combination of pressures. These pressures highlight how important it is that government can design, manage and improve the services it provides. This guide shares insights and learning from operational audits of 40 organisations and 115 assessments of services across government. It will help government handle short-term and long-term challenges.
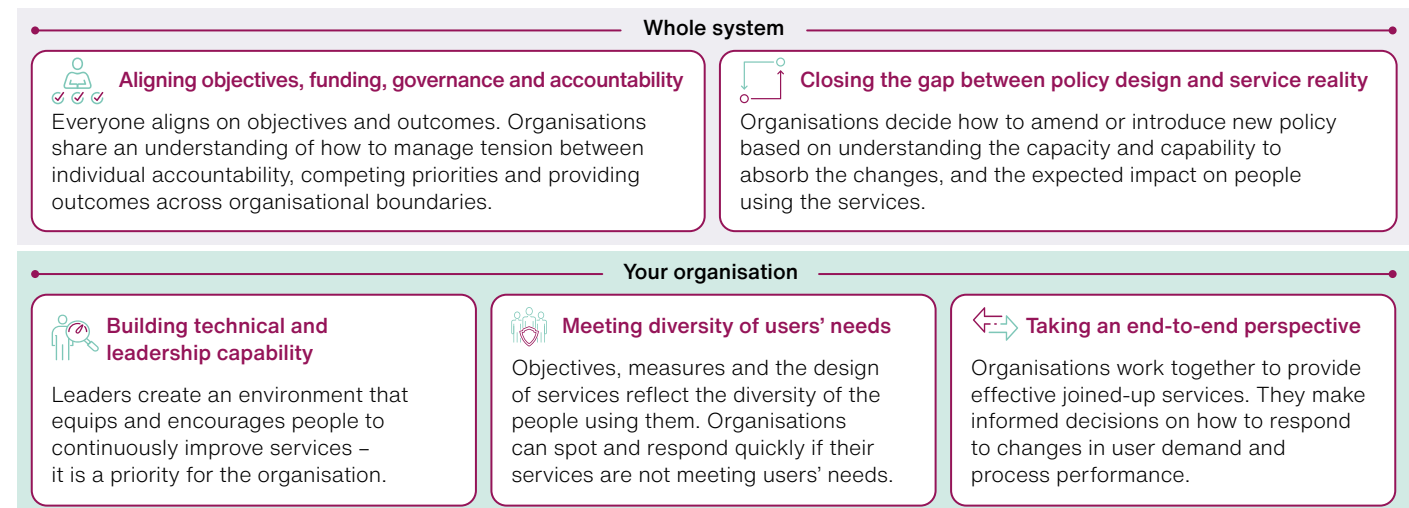
Where it applies

This guide applies equally whether your organisation's role in the service is designing policy, deciding funding, providing front-line services, or overseeing whole sectors or policy outcomes. It applies to specific services, whole organisations and across multiple organisations.

What is needed?

1 A 'whole-system' approach that allows organisations to work together to deliver outcomes they cannot achieve alone.

2 Improved operational management within organisations – the skills and ways of working needed to translate policy intent into effective services for end users.

Our guide, overleaf, summarises the detailed analysis in our good practice guide on what senior leaders need to get right. What questions do senior leaders need to ask themselves and others, in their organisations and beyond? What are the common pitfalls to avoid and warning signs to look out for?

The five areas to get right – what does 'good' look like?

Whole system

Aligning objectives, funding, governance and accountability

Everyone aligns on objectives and outcomes. Organisations share an understanding of how to manage tension between individual accountability, competing priorities and providing outcomes across organisational boundaries.

Closing the gap between policy design and service reality

Organisations decide how to amend or introduce new policy based on understanding the capacity and capability to absorb the changes, and the expected impact on people using the services.

Your organisation

Building technical and leadership capability

Leaders create an environment that equips and encourages people to continuously improve services – it is a priority for the organisation.

Meeting diversity of users' needs

Objectives, measures and the design of services reflect the diversity of the people using them. Organisations can spot and respond quickly if their services are not meeting users' needs.

Taking an end-to-end perspective

Organisations work together to provide effective joined-up services. They make informed decisions on how to respond to changes in user demand and process performance.

For the full good practice guide, see *Improving operational delivery in government: A good practice guide for senior leaders*

If you would like to know more about the NAO's work on people and operational management, please visit our dedicated pages or contact:

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Summary guide for senior leaders

Questions to ask when improving operational delivery, plus common pitfalls and warning signs to look out for

Whole system

Aligning objectives, funding, governance and accountability

Questions to ask:

Is everyone clear on each other's strategic objectives, where they do and do not align, and how to resolve conflicting priorities?

Do leaders' behaviours and actions encourage transparency and collaboration across boundaries?

Is there agreement on how to manage tension between accountability for whole-system outcomes and individual organisations' objectives?

Common pitfalls and warning signs:

Organisations' objectives or incentives that conflict or create problems in achieving wider system aims.

Inability to adjust accountability measures that are not working, or that do not consider changes in how the system is responding.

Whole-system performance measures designed far from where the service is provided, and which are not based on what the service user thinks is important.

Closing the gap between policy design and service reality

Questions to ask:

Is there shared understanding of the policy problem to address – whom to involve in achieving it, and whom it will affect?

Do we have a way of getting a timely understanding of the needs and experience of users, regardless of where we are in the system, particularly when making changes?

Do we have ways of working to escalate problems with providing services, capacity and capability, and emerging risks to those who need to know?

Common pitfalls and warning signs:

Not involving those delivering the service in its design or in solving service problems.

Assuming there is capacity and capability elsewhere to absorb new commitments without affecting service quality.

Your organisation

Building technical and leadership capability

Questions to ask:

Are our priorities for improving clear, and are we giving time and resource to it?

Do our people managing services have the right capability – including understanding variation in demand, using data, and spotting and fixing problems?

Does everyone feel safe to challenge the thinking of leaders and to raise concerns without repercussion?

Common pitfalls and warning signs:

Underestimating the impact senior leaders have by only asking questions and, for reports, about outputs rather than on quality, learning or the end users' perspective.

A mismatch between improvement intent and action. For example, leaders encourage innovation but do not equip people with the capability or time to do it, or they only support one-off change projects that are separate from daily work.

Meeting diversity of users' needs

Questions to ask:

Are we making decisions based on a detailed understanding of the actual or likely impact on different types of people using our service?

Do our performance measures reflect how good quality is defined by the full range of people using our services?

Do actions and behaviours, within and outside the organisation, reflect our intentions on diversity and inclusion?

Common pitfalls and warning signs:

Service design meets the most common or easiest types of demand. The process cannot meet more atypical and harder cases.

Performance measurement is based on averages, masking service problems that affect particular groups.

Assuming what is important to different types of users. For example, focusing on speed and outputs when quality may be a higher priority for some.

Taking an end-to-end perspective

Questions to ask:

Is there agreement on the accountability for managing the end-to-end process, and solving problems that have an impact on different parts of it?

Do data flow transparently and in real time across organisations to allow all to identify service problems quickly enough?

Do our measures tell us how well we are meeting the quality needs of others in the end-to-end process?

Common pitfalls and warning signs:

Not confirming the needs of people in other parts of the end-to-end system.

A focus on output at the end of the process rather than measures that identify unmet users' needs or costly failings all the way through.

An organisation, function or task-based approach to improving the process rather than one that focuses on the total benefit to end users.