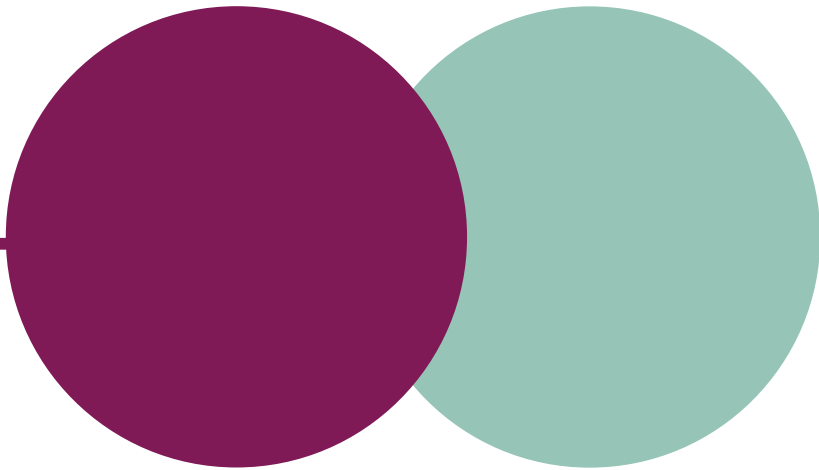




National Audit Office




Lessons learned: Delivering programmes at speed

Cross-government

REPORT

**by the Comptroller
and Auditor General**

**SESSION 2021-22
24 SEPTEMBER 2021
HC 667**



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Cross-government

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

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Gareth Davies
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

17 September 2021

Lessons learned reports

Our lessons learned reports bring together what we know on important recurring issues to make it easier for others to understand and apply the lessons from our work.

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The National Audit Office study team consisted of:


Jemma Dunne,
Laura McIntyre-Brown, and
Josh Perks with assistance from
Sultana Azmi, Kristian Barrett
and Sophie Carruthers, under
the direction of Emma Willson.

For further information about the National Audit Office please contact:

National Audit Office
Press Office
157-197 Buckingham Palace Road
Victoria
London
SW1W 9SP

 020 7798 7400

 www.nao.org.uk

 @NAOorguk

Lessons learned: Delivering programmes at speed

In our work we have seen examples of where government sets out to deliver programmes at speed, accelerating its normal processes. Government has sometimes done this well. However, delivering at speed creates new and heightened risks for both the programme and the organisation delivering the programme. Given these risks, not all programmes can, or indeed should, be delivered at speed.

We have identified insights to help decision-makers determine when or how a programme should be delivered at speed and then continually test whether they can successfully deliver the programme.

To deliver a programme successfully at speed, decision-makers need to ask themselves:



Why the programme needs to be delivered quickly.

Determining if speed is necessary and justifiable to decide where risks can be taken.



How much risk they want to, and can, take on within the programme and across the organisation.

Understanding the risks to value for money, such as things being missed or increased costs, and their risk appetite will help them decide whether those risks are worth taking.



Whether they can effectively monitor and manage the risks of speed by, for example:

Including speed as a specific programme objective to provide a clear framework for decision-making and help make trade-offs between speed, cost and outcomes.

Building teams with the right leadership, skills and experience to make clear, timely and reliable decisions.

Tailoring processes to add value and momentum to programme decision-making.

Recognising the uncertainties of delivering at speed and managing these.

Introduction

1 The UK government manages a wide range of programmes, from building railways, defence equipment, schools and IT systems, to transforming services. At 31 March 2021, the Government Major Projects Portfolio, which brings together government's largest, most innovative and riskiest projects and programmes, included 184 projects with a total whole-life cost of £542 billion and monetised benefits of £826 billion.¹ These are being delivered across 18 departments and their arm's-length bodies.

2 Government is responsible for delivering effective and efficient programmes, which the National Audit Office (NAO) has a statutory remit to examine. As part of this statutory role, we have reviewed programmes where government aimed to deliver outcomes much quicker than would normally be expected through effective and efficient processes. This includes where external events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and EU Exit meant programme outcomes must be achieved as soon as possible or by a fixed date. It also includes programmes where government had more choice over when outcomes needed to be achieved, such as transforming offender rehabilitation services or improving broadband.

3 Some programmes have delivered successfully at speed, but not all. Speed creates greater risks which will not be appropriate or sustainable for every programme, or organisation delivering a programme, to always manage. Decision-makers need to choose whether and when these risks are worth taking and the compromises they are willing to make.

4 Drawing insights from our published work, this report supports those deciding whether to deliver a programme at speed by setting out:

- what they should consider, such as why a programme needs to be delivered quickly and the risks that may result; and
- what needs to be in place to manage the risks.

The report supports those responsible for delivering any programme to an immovable date or in an emergency, as well as those making a deliberate choice to deliver at speed. We set out our scope and evidence base in Appendix One.

¹ Infrastructure and Projects Authority, *Annual Report on Major Projects 2020-21*, July 2021, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/infrastructure-and-projects-authority-annual-report-2021

5 More widely, government has recently sought to improve how quickly it delivers infrastructure programmes, and in 2020, set up the Project Speed Taskforce, which aims to deliver infrastructure ‘better, greener, faster’. The November 2020 *National Infrastructure Strategy* later outlined reforms, including planning systems to make expanding schools, hospitals and other social infrastructure easier.² Now in its second phase, Project Speed continues to engage with departments to help implement these reforms.

6 Project Speed focuses on reducing the time needed for standard processes, while we focus on those programmes aiming to deliver outcomes quicker. This report does not assess government’s progress with Project Speed; however, alongside supporting decision-makers, our insights provide a new perspective to the Project Speed Taskforce’s findings and are relevant as government continues to think about speeding up infrastructure programmes without compromising quality and value for money.

7 Our insights supplement the wider good practice we would expect to see applied across all programmes, which we reference in our *Framework to review programmes* published in April 2021.³ When delivering at speed, this good practice becomes more important. This includes the need to plan, which we covered in our November 2020 *Lessons learned from Major Programmes* report.⁴

2 HM Treasury, *National Infrastructure Strategy*, November 2020, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-infrastructure-strategy

3 National Audit Office, *Framework to review programmes, Update April 2021*, April 2021, available at: www.nao.org.uk/report/framework-to-review-programmes-update-april-2021/

4 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Lessons learned from Major Programmes*, Session 2019–2021, HC 960, National Audit Office, November 2020.

What to consider when deciding to deliver at speed

8 All programmes should be efficient, avoiding, for example, wasting time or money. However, in some cases, there will be an explicit reason for programmes to be delivered more quickly. Before deciding whether to deliver at speed, decision-makers must consider why speed is necessary and what this means for the risks they want to take on. This part of the report sets out our insights on what decision-makers should consider.



To deliver successfully at speed decision-makers need to:

Consider why the programme needs to be delivered quickly.

9 Decision-makers need to be clear why speed is necessary before deciding if a programme should be delivered quickly. Our *Framework to review programmes* sets out the value of teams clarifying early on why a programme is needed and whether this particular programme meets the need.⁵ In this context, it includes the reason for speed, whether this is justified and its impact on delivery. This early thinking remains important even when delivering at speed. The Infrastructure and Projects Authority sets out the need to “invest time in thorough up-front planning to ensure the project is deliverable and affordable before commitments are given”.⁶

10 Programmes will be delivered at speed for different reasons. The reason will influence the decisions that need to be made and the risks that are taken. Some reasons for speed can be clear. This includes:

- **In an emergency situation.** Given the COVID-19 pandemic, government made significant spending decisions and decided to implement various programmes quickly. In a matter of weeks, ventilator procurement had been set up, employment support and business loan schemes were up and running, and the campaigns to house rough sleepers and deliver free school meals vouchers were designed and implemented.

⁵ See footnote 3.

⁶ Infrastructure and Projects Authority, *Principles for project success*, July 2020, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/principles-for-project-success

- **With a fixed deadline.** From London being awarded the Olympic and Paralympic Games in July 2005, government and its delivery partners had seven years to get ready for the Games. This included acquiring and preparing land, securing planning permission, undertaking design work and procurement, building and fitting out the venues, alongside planning for operating the Games leaving a lasting legacy.

11 We have also seen programmes delivered at speed simply because government wants to achieve the outcomes sooner. In these cases, without a clear rationale for speed, it can be more difficult to generate stakeholder support, and it will be harder to justify taking value for money risks. Decision-makers need to weigh the advantages of earlier outcomes against the risks. The Ministry of Justice launched its rehabilitation reforms with timescales set by ministers to deliver before the 2015 election. In setting out to meet these timescales, the Ministry of Justice did not adequately test how the transformed system might work before letting contracts; and did not have a good understanding of delivery models, working practices and governance. Its rushed implementation introduced significant risks with far-reaching consequences, including poor value for money for the taxpayer.

12 Alongside achieving outcomes sooner, speed creates opportunities to learn how programmes could be more efficient. In 2020, HM Revenue & Customs conducted a specific exercise to capture lessons learned from introducing the COVID-19 employment support schemes and is using these to inform how it is managing the schemes.



To deliver successfully at speed decision-makers need to:

Understand the risk appetite – how much risk they want to, and can, take on – within the programme and across the organisation.

13 Delivering programmes quickly can significantly increase value for money risks (**Figure 1** overleaf). These risks may fall within a programme or more widely across government or a department. Government has sometimes recognised the increased risk – for example, accounting officers have sought ministerial directions where they have felt a proposal or programme raised feasibility or value for money concerns.⁷ When responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and as prescribed by *Managing Public Money*, some accounting officers obtained directions from ministers to proceed with programmes as their speed meant they could not gain assurance over value for money.⁸

14 Given the increased risks, and with limited finances and people, government cannot deliver all programmes at speed. Our report on *Initial learning from the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic* highlighted the need to be clear about risk appetite and tolerance as the basis for choosing which trade-offs should be made in emergencies.⁹

15 At the start of a programme, decision-makers need to identify and understand the risks, benefits and reasons for speed, to decide whether to take the increased risks or, for example, change what will be delivered. Risk may arise from the existing environment, such as an aging digital landscape or inadequate data, or through simply doing things quickly. When procuring for additional freight capacity in advance of EU Exit, the Department for Transport followed a procurement route that allowed it to act quickly, but carried greater legal risk. The accounting officer recognised that the Department for Transport was taking forward a “novel and exceptional proposition” requiring careful judgement. The accounting officer concluded that there were high levels of risk, but that failure to act would lead to government losing the ability to secure the freight capacity needed to help protect the movement of critical goods. There was subsequently a legal challenge to the procurement process, which led to an out-of-court settlement.

7 Ministerial directions are formal instructions from ministers telling their department to proceed with a spending proposal, despite a reservation from the accounting officer. Accounting officers, who are directly accountable to Parliament for how the department spends its money, have a duty to seek a ministerial direction if they think a spending proposal breaches any of the following criteria: regularity (if the proposal is beyond the department's legal powers, or agreed spending budgets); propriety (if it does not meet “high standards of public conduct”, such as appropriate governance or parliamentary expectations); value for money (if something else, or doing nothing, would be cheaper and better); and feasibility (if there is doubt about the proposal being “implemented accurately, sustainably or to the intended timetable”).

8 HM Treasury, *Managing Public Money*, May 2021, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/managing-public-money

9 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Initial learning from the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic*, Session 2021-22, HC 66, National Audit Office, May 2021.

Figure 1

Examples of the risks of delivering programmes at speed

We have seen how delivering programmes quickly can create potential risks

Potential risk	Examples of where we have seen aspects of this risk
Cost risk	
For example, through options being kept open for longer	<p>During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, government started a programme to secure as many ventilators as possible, as quickly as possible. The approach prioritised speed and maximised the chances of success before considering cost. It included a willingness to accept that prices were higher than the normal market rate; deliberately supporting multiple options; and drawing significantly on technical expertise and capacity from the private sector. As its approach did not prioritise cost, government controlled costs where it could and recovered some of their committed spending once it became apparent that fewer ventilators were needed than they had originally believed.</p> <p>A government review of the COVID-19 shielding programme for the clinically extremely vulnerable concluded that, due to the speed and context in which the programme was developed, it had to be largely offered to everyone, leading to inefficiencies. It noted that should shielding be needed again, adopting a local support model could improve flexibility and potentially be more cost-effective. Government applied many of these lessons to the second iteration of shielding in November 2020.</p>
Delivery risk	
For example, a greater chance things may go wrong	<p>To support small businesses facing cash flow problems due to the COVID-19 pandemic, government moved quickly to set up the Bounce Back Loan Scheme. It introduced the programme without the controls we would normally expect to see, such as those over duplicate applications, and with less strict eligibility criteria than other comparable government loan schemes. This increased credit and fraud-related risks which meant, at the time of our report in October 2020, the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy and the British Business Bank, initially estimated that between 35% and 60% of loans may not be repaid. They are currently reviewing these figures.</p> <p>The deadlines to implement the Green Homes Grant Voucher Scheme (the scheme) constrained the time to consult with stakeholders, procure an administrator, and design and launch the scheme. The Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy and external assurance highlighted several risks of proceeding quickly, but the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy accepted these risks. The fast pace constrained its procurement options, its engagement with the installer market and, alongside the short duration of the scheme, made it hard for energy efficiency installers to mobilise to meet demand. Despite the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy's considerable efforts, the rushed delivery and implementation of the scheme has significantly reduced the benefits that might have been achieved, caused frustration for homeowners and installers, and had limited impact on job creation for the longer term.</p>
Capacity risk	
For example, teams being overworked or unsustainable performance within the programme or across business areas given skills and resources diverted	<p>The volume of work required to prepare for EU Exit was significant, with more than 22,000 civil servants working at the peak in October 2019. Staff turnover in EU Exit roles was higher than for the civil service in general, with a particularly acute problem at more senior grades.</p> <p>The Ministry of Justice lacked the capacity and capability to manage the difficulties affecting the new generation electronic monitoring programme given competing priorities and wider challenges. There were high, competing demands for scarce skills, in particular for technical expertise, across the Ministry of Justice. We found many staff were pulled onto higher-priority programmes such as the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms, which were delivering at speed.</p> <p>During the COVID-19 pandemic, staff were moved to work seen as a higher priority, such as to support the Everyone In programme to support rough sleepers.</p>

Note

- 1 The examples used in this figure are taken from published National Audit Office reports. More detail is provided in the full reports: *Investigation into how government increased the number of ventilators available to the NHS in response to COVID-19*; *Protecting and supporting the clinically extremely vulnerable during lockdown*; *Investigation into the Bounce Back Loan Scheme*; *Green Homes Grant Voucher Scheme*; *Learning for government from EU Exit preparations*; *The new generation electronic monitoring programme*; *Investigation into the housing of rough sleepers during the COVID-19 pandemic*.

What needs to be in place to monitor and manage risks

16 Where decision-makers choose to take the risks of delivering a programme quickly, they must proactively monitor and manage these increased and different risks. This part of the report shares insights to help decision-makers monitor and manage these risks.



To deliver successfully at speed decision-makers need to:

Set speed as a specific programme objective to provide a clear framework for decision-making.

- Agree clear and coherent programme objectives, which include delivering quickly, to help make trade-offs between speed, cost and outcomes.
- Ensure all those involved in the programme feed into, understand and support the objectives.

17 A programme's objectives influence how it will be run and the decisions to be made on what will be delivered when, including any necessary compromises. Having speed as a clearly stated objective means decision-makers consider speed against other objectives and understand the risks of their prioritisation decisions. Including speed as an explicit programme objective should allow decision-makers to:

- **Consider whether they can deliver what is expected in time.** The Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy did not fully reconcile the tension between creating jobs quickly and its aim of delivering a long-term carbon impact for the Green Homes Grant Voucher Scheme. This led to an overly complex scheme that could not be delivered to a satisfactory level of performance in the time available.
- **Prioritise objectives and efforts effectively.** Government set a very challenging 2025 timeline for rolling out gigabit-capable broadband across the UK. We found that prioritising speed of programme delivery over other objectives posed a risk to value for money. It meant the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport was likely to try to deliver gigabit capability to as many premises as possible, rather than starting with those in greatest need in line with its 2018 commitment.

- **Fully assess the benefits and risks of speed.** The Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy accelerated the rollout of smart meters so that the benefits could be realised as soon as possible. However, it did not make an economic assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of a faster rollout. The most significant benefits enabled by smart meters were expected to be achieved in the long term and therefore did not require an urgent rollout.

18 It is widely recognised that all those involved in a programme must have a shared understanding of a programme’s aims, including speed, early in a programme. This ranges from the minister to policy and safety teams, contractors and the user. It can be easier to get everyone bought into a programme’s speed where all parties agree early on its importance. The fixed deadline for being ready to host the Olympic and Paralympic Games created a risk, but also provided a clear shared goal which helped counter the inherent risk of multiple organisations being involved. This included government bodies and delivery partners from across the public and private sectors.



To deliver successfully at speed decision-makers need to:

Build teams with the right leadership, skills and experience to make clear, timely and reliable decisions.

- Ensure those leading the programme establish a culture of openness and collaboration and bring together the right people with the right skills at the right time.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities, so it is clear who is accountable and making decisions.
- Recognise the wider impact of bringing people together to deliver at speed.

19 All programmes need the right leadership and people to deliver effectively. Our *Framework to review programmes* asks whether the programme has the right culture and leadership and if the organisation has the necessary resources.¹⁰ The Infrastructure and Projects Authority’s *Principles for project success* includes prioritising people and behaviour.¹¹ It recommends planning ahead for a diversity of people, skills and experience to build a strong, properly resourced and competent team.

¹⁰ See footnote 3.

¹¹ See footnote 6.

20 We have seen the importance of strong leadership for delivering programmes at speed. This includes having leaders with softer skills to encourage a culture of transparency, positivity and collaboration, alongside more detailed technical programme management or subject matter skills. Many of the stakeholders we interviewed for our report on the Everyone In programme to support rough sleepers during the pandemic considered Baroness Casey's experience, leadership and drive as key in pushing forward the programme in its early stages. We also saw that when a new senior responsible owner was appointed to oversee the programme to support the clinically extremely vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a marked improvement in joined-up working in the programme.

21 For programmes delivered at speed, decisions need to be made efficiently and swiftly. To do this, leaders must join up expertise both within and outside the organisation. Policy and operational staff at HM Revenue & Customs and HM Treasury worked closely to develop the COVID-19 employment support schemes, with HM Treasury leading on policy design and HM Revenue & Customs leading on administrative design, implementation and administration. Our investigation into preparations for the potential COVID-19 vaccines described how government set up a Vaccine Taskforce to drive forward, expedite and coordinate its efforts to research and then produce vaccines as it was concerned that the civil service did not have all the necessary knowledge to secure access to vaccines quickly. Recruitment to the Vaccine Taskforce was carried out from a number of sources and includes civil servants, contractors and industry specialists.

22 Effective collaboration becomes more important when programmes involve multiple stakeholders. We found that the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme team successfully expanded the original programme at speed with good partnerships between central and local government, strong working relationships with international partners and a concerted effort by all those involved. On the 'Get ready for Brexit' campaign, we concluded that Cabinet Office's analysis of options should have focused more on the desired impact and required behaviour change. However, it did set up close working arrangements across departments, including regular meetings with the Cabinet Office representatives from all departments to establish an overall coordinated campaign. The Cabinet Office considered this resulted in better, faster decision-making and more integrated messages.

23 Governance structures must support joint-working and collaboration, and allow strong oversight, challenge and direction with clearly defined accountability for making decisions. The governance structure should be tailored to support the pace of the work. We have seen different governance structures work in different circumstances, but the main principles are that they need to:

- **Have clear accountability lines.** The NHS Test and Trace Service, which was created to lead the government's COVID-19 test and trace programme, was part of the Department of Health & Social Care and subject to its financial, information and staffing controls. However, the NHS Test and Trace Service's head, the executive chair, did not initially report to the Department of Health & Social Care's ministers or permanent secretary but to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Secretary. This unusual organisational relationship created dual reporting lines, which brought risks of unclear accountability. The relationship subsequently changed so that the executive chair reported to the Secretary of State for Health.
- **Involve the right people at the right time.** To speed up contracting for COVID-19 vaccines and increase the chances of purchasing vaccines, government set up new structures bringing together ministers to approve expenditure. Investments valued at more than £150 million, including the vaccine contracts, were reviewed by a new Ministerial Panel consisting of ministers from four departments.

24 Often, programme teams will need to balance having a clear process against bringing people in at the right time. In our report on *Learning for government from EU Exit preparations* we set out that simple, clear structures are essential for quick decision-making and clear accountability.¹² However, they can bring risks of bottlenecks or limiting wider engagement. We had highlighted the complex structures of boards and that departments were unclear on where to get cross-government information. This delayed departments' progress in some cases. A simpler structure was established in 2019, with clearer accountabilities and a more direct route for decision-making. Although, as some decisions could not be taken outside of two ministerial committees, we reported that this structure could hinder progress. When trying to strike the right balance, there will always be compromises with the risks of each approach needing to be recognised and managed.

¹² Comptroller and Auditor General, *Learning for government from EU Exit preparations*, Session 2019–2021, HC 578, National Audit Office, September 2020.

25 For programmes delivering at speed, the skills required need to be identified and addressed quickly. These skills extend beyond programme management to legal, commercial, digital or wider specialist skills. Programmes delivering at speed often draw on skills and resources from across the civil service, as well as industry and the private sector. However, decision-makers need to consider the resilience built into an organisation, or what could be stopped or descoped, when deciding to deliver a programme at speed. In getting ready for EU Exit, departments worked together to move staff on medium- or short-term loans around Whitehall. As of 31 October 2017, 61% of the Department for Exiting the European Union's staff were loaned from other government departments, the majority on two-year posts. The Cabinet Office also set up a central system to match urgent vacancies with staff willing to move to EU Exit work, and more than 1,500 people were temporarily loaned in this way to be in place in October 2019. While staff have been deployed flexibly to deal with crises before, the scale of the moves and the central coordination were new.



To deliver successfully at speed decision-makers need to:

Tailor programme processes to add value and momentum to programme decision-making.

- Establish strong and timely risk management processes, particularly to identify the emerging risks of delivering quickly.
- Align programme controls, such as approvals, to the specific programme risks.
- Be transparent on the decisions and risks that have been taken, particularly where processes have changed to deliver at speed.
- Tailor assurance to align with programme risks.

26 When speed is an objective, it becomes even more important to get the programme basics right. For example, our *Framework to review programmes* highlights the importance of strong risk management and change control processes.¹³ It is also important for programmes to follow formal processes where possible, including those set out in HM Treasury's approvals process for programmes and projects, and its Green Book on appraisal and evaluation.^{14,15}

¹³ See footnote 3.

¹⁴ HM Treasury, *Treasury approvals process for programmes and projects*, November 2016, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/treasury-approvals-process-for-programmes-and-projects

¹⁵ HM Treasury, *The Green Book: appraisal and evaluation in central government*, November 2020, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-green-book-appraisal-and-evaluation-in-central-government

27 When delivering at speed, good risk management – identifying, reducing and managing risks – becomes particularly important. Doing things quickly, such as through using non-competitive procurement, may create new risks. Also, organisations have less time to understand the environment, which may create risks or lead to more uncertainties, meaning quick decisions need to be made or approaches changed. In our work on the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, we found that the Olympic Delivery Authority’s monitoring and management of its supply chain risks protected the programme from delays. With the economic downturn, and therefore concerns over value for money, the Olympic Delivery Authority got approval for a publicly funded approach to building the Olympic Village and Media Centre rather than using private developers.

28 Processes and controls, such as business cases, reduce programme delivery risks. For programmes delivering at speed, organisations need to consider the purpose of each process to consciously weigh up which are needed to manage the risks and at which time. Decision-makers may want to consider alternatives such as streamlining processes, running them in parallel or ensuring they follow on seamlessly. To make faster decisions and therefore increase the chance of purchasing vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic, departments changed how investments were approved. HM Treasury and Cabinet Office increased the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy’s spending limit and delegation-level. The Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy also reduced the time investment decisions would normally take, after having introduced similar processes for EU Exit programmes.

29 When tailoring processes, decision-makers should ensure they have fully considered all the issues regardless as to whether they complete formal documentation or not. Given the compressed timeframe to design each of the employment support schemes during the COVID-19 pandemic, HM Revenue & Customs and HM Treasury could not follow standard processes comprehensively. They had insufficient time to produce the detailed documentation – such as business cases, options appraisal and detailed cost-benefit analysis – that we would normally expect to be available to support investment decisions. Instead, policy and operational officials worked closely together to rapidly develop employment support schemes that they could implement quickly.

30 Without the necessary thinking, there could be an increase in programme risks. For example, when we reported on the Bounce Back Loan Scheme in October 2020, the lack of business case and clarity over objectives have made it harder to measure success. We reported that the Scheme achieved its initial objective of quickly supporting small businesses, but a lack of more detailed scheme-specific objectives will make it difficult to measure its longer-term success. Systems and processes had evolved since the launch, but much hard work remained to ensure that the risks to value for money were minimised.

31 Documenting decisions, and transparency over what is decided, is important for all programmes. It becomes even more so when delivering at speed means organisations do not follow expected processes, with transparency becoming an additional control. Our work on the COVID-19 ventilator programme showed sufficient documentation is possible at speed. We found sufficient record of the programme's rationale, key spending decisions and a clear explanation of the information behind their decisions.

32 Assurance over a programme (internal or external) at the right time can provide a strong and effective control when delivering at speed. It needs to be proportionate to the programme risks without becoming overwhelming. For instance, we found the Department for Exiting the EU had limited independent assurance over the progress departments reported on their EU Exit preparations and did not have enough understanding of how missed or moved milestones would affect overall delivery. Government's functional expertise, for example in the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, provided support to departments throughout the period of preparations. However, systematic review by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority of the projects being undertaken started slowly in 2017, and the amount of insight and assurance it provided was greater nearer the end of the process than the beginning.



To deliver successfully at speed decision-makers need to:

Recognise the uncertainties associated with delivering programmes quickly and have a plan to manage these.

- Retain flexibility by, for example, keeping options open, considering a minimum viable product, or testing the riskiest aspects of the programme.
- Ensure good information is available to: monitor progress; understand potential issues; and avoid making the wrong decisions early in a programme when there is limited information.

33 When developing programmes at speed, greater uncertainty often means a greater need for flexibility to handle setbacks and changes. Uncertainty may arise from the lack of time to understand different perspectives or test what systems or processes may work. It is important to plan flexibility into programmes at speed, and we have seen different ways of doing this. Decision-makers should consider:

- **Keeping options open.** At the outset of the vaccination programme, the government could not know for certain if or when a vaccine against COVID-19 would be developed. The Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy chose to purchase several different types of COVID-19 vaccines from different pharmaceutical companies to create options, recognising the uncertainty over which ones would be approved as safe and effective.
- **Reducing the scope, or keeping things simple, allowing for later changes.** To deliver at speed, the scope of a programme may be reduced, or a minimum viable product produced. It should be clear how potential trade-offs could be addressed later and what this means for the programme outcomes. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, government focused on getting employment support schemes in place quickly, so it was not able to work through the implications of its design decisions on different groups of taxpayers fully. Subsequently, it adjusted some processes and eligibility criteria.
- **What must be tested to progress the programme.** Piloting programmes can help identify risks early so issues can be addressed before a programme is rolled out. To deliver quickly, we have seen departments take on more risks by reducing the time or scope for testing and piloting. When doing so, they need to consider the impact on programme risks. For example, we found that having to meet tight timescales set by ministers, the Ministry of Justice did not adequately test how reforms to the rehabilitation system might work before letting contracts. It ended pilots early and even abandoned some before they started.

34 For all programmes, data and information should be used in the right way and at the right time – for delivering programmes at speed this helps establish where issues may arise and when swift action is required. Our report on the Green Homes Grant Voucher Scheme recognised government’s desire to act quickly in the interests of delivering an economic stimulus but concluded it should be prepared to limit or delay the launch of a programme if the evidence suggests it is not ready.

35 For any programme, some decisions, particularly early on, will need to be made on limited information. This becomes more likely when delivering at speed given there is less time available for early thinking. To reduce uncertainties, decision-makers need good-quality information at the right time. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the positive impact of sharing data promptly, such as on the ventilator programme. It also showed the importance of acting and adapting plans based on the latest information, such as with vaccines. For programmes delivering at speed, decision-makers should ensure data and information:

- **Focuses on what needs to be delivered.** For example, on Crossrail, our May 2019 report found that the emphasis on progress reports presented to the board and sponsors was on what had been achieved, rather than on the level of risk to successful delivery that remained in the programme.
- **Is shared efficiently.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, local authorities needed a range of data from the NHS Test and Trace Service to monitor what was happening in their areas and manage local responses. Our interim report in December 2020 highlighted that NHS Test and Trace had to resolve a number of governance and security issues before it could share detailed data on cases, meaning that local authorities did not always have the information they needed. In our update report, published in June 2021, stakeholders reported that, while data-sharing with local authorities had improved, they still could not access all the information they needed when they needed it, for example on the uptake of testing.
- **Is considered at the right time so action can be taken.** At the time of our 2019 report on transforming rehabilitation, we recommended the Ministry of Justice should think carefully about its next steps in delivering the reforms. We said it should pause and reflect on its proposed approach to provide assurance that it was deliverable and consistent with the strategic aims of the probation systems. The Ministry of Justice subsequently decided to bring probation services wholly within the control of the public sector.

- **Includes early warning indicators to help anticipate likely points of failure across risks.** To respond quickly, decision-makers need to understand the reasons behind variances in programme information to determine what action they may need to take. For example, our 2015 report on lessons learned from welfare reform highlighted that when rolling out the Personal Independence Payment programme, the Department for Work & Pensions did not monitor the total number of assessment claims outstanding against its expectations, as it had done for Employment and Support Allowance, until June 2014. It took several weeks to identify delays and realise assessment providers were not meeting expected performance levels.
- **Is considered within the right environment, so issues are raised and acted upon.** In our *Lessons learned from Major Programmes* report, we highlighted that for the right information to flow through the programme, bodies must work to embed a culture of transparency and honesty.¹⁶ Pressures (such as a focus on speed) can create defensiveness about the programme or allow a good news culture to develop, which can undermine processes intended to transmit accurate information. This means that opportunities to identify and mitigate serious issues may be missed and instead emerge suddenly and unexpectedly.

¹⁶ See footnote 4.

Appendix One

Our scope and evidence base

Scope

1 Through our work, we have identified government programmes being delivered at speed – quicker than normal, efficient processes – for different reasons. This includes programmes introduced following the recent COVID-19 pandemic, alongside other programmes to introduce new services, processes, or infrastructure. From this back catalogue we have identified common findings and lessons learned on delivering at speed.

2 Given a likely continuing need for programmes to be delivered quickly, and government's recent focus on delivering infrastructure programmes faster through its Project Speed, we have drawn together our lessons learned from across the relevant programmes we have considered. This provides decision-makers a guide for determining when to deliver programmes quickly and whether it can manage the underlying risks. We do not assess government's progress with Project Speed; however, our insights may be relevant as government continues to think about how it can accelerate delivery of infrastructure programmes without compromising quality and value for money.

3 Our report provides insights for decision-makers on delivering programmes quickly. It sits alongside and does not replace, the wider good practice we would expect to see applied across all programmes, which we reference in our *Framework to review programmes* published in April 2021.¹⁷ This report includes specific examples from our published work. These provide illustrative examples and are not indicative of the overall performance of departments.

¹⁷ National Audit Office, *Framework to review programmes, Update April 2021*, April 2021, available at: www.nao.org.uk/report/framework-to-review-programmes-update-april-2021/

Evidence base

4 The fieldwork for this report, carried out between May and August 2021, primarily involved drawing together findings and recommendations from NAO reports published up to 15 September 2021 (**Figure 2**). This covered those reports we identified as looking at a programme delivered at speed. It also included our previous lessons learned reports and good-practice guides, such as our audit framework to review programmes. Drawing from this material, we provide our perspective on the lessons that may apply to delivering programmes at speed. Where relevant we refer to wider material, such as from the Infrastructure and Projects Authority. We also reviewed published documents in relation to Project Speed.

5 Our evidence base draws from published NAO material produced over a number of years. We have not updated our previous findings but do recognise recent developments in some cases. We only draw insights from programmes we have looked at through our work. We tested our insights with selected individuals from across seven government bodies. This allowed us to test the robustness of our insights, ensure that they more realistically reflected front-line delivery and that they align with lessons identified by others. We also met with HM Treasury to understand the context of Project Speed and how this applied to our insights.

Figure 2

National Audit Office publications used in this report

We used a wide variety of reports to inform our insights

Report	Website link
<i>The Millennium Dome</i> , Session 1999-2000, HC 936, November 2000	www.nao.org.uk/report/the-millennium-dome/
<i>Ministry of Defence: Rapid procurement of capability to support operations</i> , Session 2003-2004, HC 1161, November 2004	www.nao.org.uk/report/ministry-of-defence-the-rapid-procurement-of-capability-to-support-operations/
<i>Preparation for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games – Risk assessment and management</i> , Session 2006-07, HC 252, February 2007	www.nao.org.uk/report/preparations-for-the-london-2012-olympic-and-paralympic-games-risk-assessment-and-management/
<i>Preparations for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games: Progress Report June 2008</i> , Session 2007-08, HC 490, June 2008	www.nao.org.uk/report/preparations-for-the-london-2012-olympic-and-paralympic-games-progress-report-june-2008/
<i>Preparations for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games: Progress report February 2010</i> , Session 2009-10, HC 298, February 2010	www.nao.org.uk/report/preparations-for-the-london-2012-olympic-and-paralympic-games-progress-report-february-2010/
<i>Option Appraisal: Making informed decisions in government</i> , May 2011	www.nao.org.uk/report/option-appraisal-making-informed-decisions-in-government/
<i>Preparations for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games: Progress Report December 2011</i> , Session 2010-2012, HC 1596, December 2011	www.nao.org.uk/report/preparations-for-the-london-2012-olympic-and-paralympic-games-progress-report-december-2011/
<i>The London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games: post-Games Review</i> , Session 2012-13, HC 794, December 2012	www.nao.org.uk/report/the-london-2012-olympic-games-and-paralympic-games-post-games-review/
<i>Personal Independence Payment: Early Progress</i> , Session 2013-14, HC 1070, February 2014	www.nao.org.uk/report/personal-independence-payments-pip-2/
<i>Welfare reform – lessons learned</i> , Session 2015-16, HC 77, May 2015	www.nao.org.uk/report/welfare-reform-lessons-learned/
<i>Outcome-based payment schemes: government's use of payment by results</i> , Session 2015-16, HC 86, June 2015	www.nao.org.uk/report/outcome-based-payment-schemes-governments-use-of-payment-by-results/
<i>Transforming Rehabilitation</i> , Session 2015-16, HC 951, April 2016	www.nao.org.uk/report/transforming-rehabilitation/
<i>The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme</i> , Session 2016-17, HC 626, September 2016	www.nao.org.uk/report/the-syrian-vulnerable-persons-resettlement-programme/
<i>The new generation electronic monitoring programme</i> , Session 2017-2019, HC 242, July 2017	www.nao.org.uk/report/the-new-generation-electronic-monitoring-programme/
<i>Rolling out smart meters</i> , Session 2017-2019, HC 1680, November 2018	www.nao.org.uk/report/rolling-out-smart-meters/
<i>The award of contracts for additional freight capacity on ferry services (memorandum)</i> , February 2019	www.nao.org.uk/report/the-award-of-contracts-for-additional-freight-capacity-on-ferry-services-2/
<i>Transforming rehabilitation: Progress Review</i> , Session 2017-2019, HC 1986, March 2019	www.nao.org.uk/report/transforming-rehabilitation-progress-review/
<i>Completing Crossrail</i> , Session 2017-2019, HC 2106, May 2019	www.nao.org.uk/report/crossrail/
<i>Out-of-court settlement with Eurotunnel (memorandum)</i> , May 2019	www.nao.org.uk/report/out-of-court-settlement-with-eurotunnel/
<i>EU Exit: The Get ready for Brexit Campaign</i> , Session 2019-20, HC 22, January 2020	www.nao.org.uk/report/eu-exit-the-get-ready-for-brexit-campaign/
<i>High Speed Two: A progress update</i> , Session 2019-20, HC 40, January 2020	www.nao.org.uk/report/high-speed-two-a-progress-update/

Figure 2 *continued*

National Audit Office reports used in this report

Report	Website link
<i>Investigation into how government increased the number of ventilators available to the NHS in response to COVID-19</i> , Session 2019–2021, HC 731, September 2020	www.nao.org.uk/report/increasing-ventilator-capacity-in-response-to-covid-19/
<i>Learning for government from EU Exit preparations</i> , Session 2019–2021, HC 578, September 2020	www.nao.org.uk/report/learning-for-government-from-eu-exit-preparations/
<i>Improving Broadband</i> , Session 2019–2021, HC 863, October 2020	www.nao.org.uk/report/improving-broadband/
<i>Implementing Employment Support schemes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic</i> , Session 2019–2021, HC 862, October 2020	www.nao.org.uk/report/implementing-employment-support-schemes-in-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/
<i>Investigation into the Bounce Back Loan Scheme</i> , Session 2019–2021, HC 860, October 2020	www.nao.org.uk/report/bounce-back-loan-scheme/
<i>Lessons learned from Major Programmes</i> , Session 2019–2021, HC 960, November 2020	www.nao.org.uk/report/lessons-learned-from-major-programmes/
<i>Investigation into preparations for potential COVID-19 vaccines</i> , Session 2019–2021, HC 1071, December 2020	www.nao.org.uk/report/investigation-into-preparations-for-potential-covid-19-vaccines/
<i>The government's approach to test and trace in England – interim report</i> , Session 2019–2021, HC 1070, December 2020	www.nao.org.uk/report/the-governments-approach-to-test-and-trace-in-england-interim-report/
<i>Investigation into the free school meals voucher scheme</i> , Session 2019–2021, HC 1036, December 2020	www.nao.org.uk/report/investigation-into-the-free-school-meals-voucher-scheme/
<i>Investigation into the housing of rough sleepers during the COVID-19 Pandemic</i> , Session 2019–2021, HC 1075, January 2021	www.nao.org.uk/report/the-housing-of-rough-sleepers-during-the-covid19-pandemic/
<i>Protecting and supporting the clinically extremely vulnerable during lockdown</i> , Session 2019–2021, HC 1131, February 2021	www.nao.org.uk/report/protecting-and-supporting-the-vulnerable-during-lockdown/
<i>Good practice guidance: Fraud and error</i> , March 2021	www.nao.org.uk/report/good-practice-guidance-fraud-and-error/
<i>Improving operational delivery in government: A good practice guide for senior leaders</i> , March 2021	www.nao.org.uk/report/improving-operational-delivery-in-government/
<i>Framework to review programmes</i> , Update April 2021, April 2021	www.nao.org.uk/report/framework-to-review-programmes-update-april-2021/
<i>Initial learning from the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic</i> , Session 2021-22, HC 66, May 2021	www.nao.org.uk/report/initial-learning-from-the-governments-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/
<i>Test and trace in England – Progress Update</i> , Session 2021-22, HC 295, June 2021	www.nao.org.uk/report/test-and-trace-in-england-progress-update/
<i>Crossrail – a progress update</i> , Session 2021-22, HC 299, July 2021	www.nao.org.uk/report/crossrail-progress-update/
<i>Efficiency in government</i> , Session 2021-22, HC 303, July 2021	www.nao.org.uk/report/efficiency-in-government/
<i>Green Homes Grant Voucher Scheme</i> , Session 2021-22, HC 302, September 2021	www.nao.org.uk/report/green-homes-grant/
<i>The Environmental Land Management Scheme</i> , Session 2021-22, HC 664, September 2021	www.nao.org.uk/report/the-environmental-land-management-scheme/

Note

- 1 This figure details all the publications that were considered in this report. Not all programmes were identified as being delivered at speed according to our definition or were used as examples.

Source: National Audit Office published reports

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