

Improving services in government: good practice guide

Methodology appendix

Our scope

1 This appendix accompanies the National Audit Office's (NAO) good practice guide, *Improving services in government*, which was published on the NAO's website from October 2022. The guide shares practical tips on how to improve the quality and efficiency of services provided by government. This document describes the guide's scope and the evidence base for its insights. As a product with both web and standalone content in a pdf, the guide looks different from typical NAO reports to support its aim and to make it easier for our audience to find and use our insights.

2 There is a lot at stake in getting service delivery right. Government provides a huge variety of services on a day-to-day basis that people rely on, such as applying for a passport, driving licences and benefits, or using accident and emergency departments in hospitals. This includes services that are invisible to most people but are important for the effective functioning of government, such as running recruitment campaigns and delivering facilities support. For the next three years, government expects to spend around £400 billion a year on the day-to-day running costs of public services, grants and administration.

This means that even small improvements can achieve better value for money as well as impacting the experience of the people using the services. For government, the opportunity to improve how it spends money providing services is relevant for headcount, efficiency and service delivery challenges.

3 Our guide is applicable to all types of services and follows our 2021 report, [Improving operational delivery in government](#), which focused on the senior leaders in government who set the strategic purpose and conditions for service delivery across organisations and complex systems.¹ This guide complements that report but is for a different audience. It is for people leading teams that provide services – those people in departments who make daily decisions on how to meet demand and performance expectations.

4 Our objective is to provide a practical 'how to' handbook to help improve how government provides services. Our guide collates insights on repeated operational issues and gives people working in operations ideas on how they might fix them. It also provides case study examples of good practice, practical tips and prompt questions for people to use for further learning. We do not

make recommendations aimed at individual departments or for specific services. Instead, we share insights and principles that people within organisations can adapt to their context to improve the services they provide.

5 Many factors make up good operational management. We chose to focus this guide on three specific themes that our work in this area over the past 12 years has highlighted as repeated operations management challenges for government organisations. Our previous reports based on this work show the importance of these three themes for improving service delivery.² The three themes are:

- how organisations understand and manage demand for services;
- how they use performance measures to improve performance of services; and
- how they systematically learn and improve how they carry out these services.

6 We are taking a phased approach to sharing our insight on these themes, starting with our insights on understanding and managing demand. We plan to publish more content in the future and are likely to cover areas such as understanding the needs of people using services, designing services and managing end-to-end processes.

¹ National Audit Office, *Improving operational delivery in government – A good practice guide for senior leaders*, March 2021.

² National Audit Office, [Managing business operations – what government needs to get right](#), September 2015; and National Audit Office, [Improving operational delivery in government – A good practice guide for senior leaders](#), March 2021.

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7 The guide’s content uses perspectives gathered in three workshops with people who work in and manage government services. It also uses learning from the NAO’s systematic assessments of government’s capability in operations management.

Our evidence base

8 The insights for our good practice guide were developed following analysis of evidence collected primarily between February and July 2022.

Research methods

Workshops

9 We held three workshops with 39 operational staff who work in and manage different government services to gather primary evidence on their experiences and showcase operational management in different contexts. We used the workshops to identify and discuss the operational challenges they face in their roles and how they address them. We wanted the discussions to be a useful learning resource for workshop participants and to use the insights generated from the discussions to inform our good practice guide for people working in services across government.

Participant selection

10 We focused our research on three government services and held one workshop for each. We chose the three services for the following reasons:

- Applications – We chose application services due to the scale of its contribution to government’s total operational activity. The government’s 2022–2025 Roadmap for Digital and Data identifies the top 75 services for government and the majority involve processing applications.³ Application processes across government provide services for millions of people annually, for example processing tax. We expected this workshop to provide valuable insight into how a significant proportion of government’s overall customer demand is dealt with in practice.
- Complaints – We chose to focus on how service teams deal with complaints as it is a truly common process that all government organisations provide. We expected that a workshop on this topic would provide insight into how different organisations deal with similar challenges. It would also give participants an opportunity to interact and learn from each other’s experiences.
- Parliamentary Questions – We chose responding to Parliamentary Questions to include a service with a different type of user in our research. Applications and complaints services are typically used by external customers, whereas the Parliamentary Questions service has an internal end user within Parliament. Like complaints, responding to Parliamentary Questions is also a common process across government.

11 We contacted 13 government departments to invite officials to volunteer to participate in the workshops. We selected the departments based on the relevance of our chosen services to the work that they do. One department advised us to include some of its arm’s-length bodies, which we also invited to participate. We aimed to capture a wide range of perspectives, reflecting a mix of sectors and service sizes (that is, services that deal with a range of case volumes and complexities). We were not prescriptive on the grade or role held by participants but asked that they work on, manage, or contribute to the day-to-day service. We asked that people attending had experience between them that covered both how day-to-day work is done and how oversight of the service is managed. We achieved the following sample for each workshop:

Workshop	Number of organisations that attended	Number of services represented	Number of people who attended
Applications	3	4	9
Complaints	6	6	16
Parliamentary Questions	7	7	14
Total	16	17	39

*Total number of organisations that attended is more than the number invited as departments could attend workshops for more than one service. One department had more than one service represented at a workshop.



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12 Our workshops achieved good representation across central government departments but had more limited representation from non-central government organisations such as agencies and other public bodies. They did not include representation from a team that was delivering a service in local government. A limitation of our approach is that organisations self-selected to participate, and our workshops do not represent all operational service teams.

Fieldwork

13 The three workshops took place in April and May 2022, were carried out online, and each lasted approximately five hours. They were structured around our three themes (described in paragraph 5) and designed to explore participants' perspectives on what aspects of their services are operating well and what could be improved. We organised the workshops to encourage both individual perspectives as well as group discussions. We provided participants with material before the session to help them prepare. The workshop used various facilitation approaches including a mix of presentational discussions, group discussions and breakout sessions for individual service teams. We took detailed notes of the discussion and recorded participants' contributions using electronic whiteboards and the meeting's chat and polling functionality. The same approach was used in all three workshops.

14 We asked service teams to complete an information request before the workshop covering data about their service and its key processes. We used this information to better understand the services represented in the

workshop and to provide context for some of the perspectives shared with us. We also used the information request to identify potential examples of good operational practice to use as case studies in our guide.

Analytical approach

15 We logged and organised participants' contributions in a matrix after the workshop to enable comprehensive and consistent analysis. Each contribution was categorised as either an operational factor that is working well or a barrier to improving. We analysed the data thematically to identify the full range of views and experiences. The contributions were then grouped based on the underlying root cause of each data point, to identify and draw out common themes and insights. We carried out a separate analysis for each of our three themes.

16 Our workshops were the new, primary evidence-gathering methodology for informing the insights provided in the good practice guide. Our analysis was used to:

- identify and report key operational challenges experienced by people delivering services in government;
- identify and report operational factors or approaches that are working well and helping people to deliver government services; and
- identify potential examples of good operational practice which we could explore in more detail and turn into useful case studies.

17 Our analytical approach had some limitations. It assumed that the three government services we focused on – applications, complaints and Parliamentary Questions – are representative of other services and the insights generated from these teams has wider application. However, while there may be some differences between services, the three workshops raised a consistent set of issues and themes. That gives us confidence that our findings and insights can be applied more widely. We used our judgement to allocate participants' contributions to the appropriate root cause categories and agreed the final allocation by team discussion and independent review.

Case study examples

18 The aims of our case studies were to:

- provide practical, real-life examples to illustrate the good operational practices referenced in the guide;
- identify, showcase and promote some of the good operational practices being used by people providing government services; and
- share and facilitate learning across government by allowing operational service teams to learn from the experience of others.

19 Each case study includes a description of the operational problem that teams had to overcome or the opportunity for improvement, the approach taken by the service team to implement the improvement, and the impact or benefit of the change made.

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Case study selection

20 We generated ideas for potential case study examples through our workshop discussions, a review of responses to our workshop information requests, and a document review of previous NAO reports. From this extended list we selected case studies that:

- related to our three thematic areas and the key points that had emerged during our workshop discussions;
- reflected principles of good operational practice that we had identified in our previous work; and
- provided a sufficient level of detail to be considered a useful learning tool.

Fieldwork and analysis

21 Each case study comprised an interview with an official or officials from the service team that was involved in implementing the operational practice or approach under consideration. This discussion was used to gather specific details on the nature of the case study to allow us to write up each example. This note was then shared with government organisations to ensure it was a fair and accurate reflection of the case.

22 The case examples used in the guide are self-reported and are examples of operational practices or approaches that people in government told us worked well for them. We have not audited or validated the case study examples, for example by obtaining documented evidence of their benefits.

Document review

Background review

Focus and purpose

23 We reviewed a range of publicly available information to help define the parameters of our good practice guide and deepen our understanding of the key operational management issues in delivering government services. As fieldwork progressed, we focused on reviewing material relating to our three themes – managing demand, using performance information, and learning and improvement. As part of our document review, we examined previous NAO reports, government and third-party publications, and international research.

Analytical approach

24 For our initial literature review, which informed the scope of the guide, we captured a broader understanding of previous work on the topic rather than using set criteria. After we identified our three themes, we adapted our document review to extract relevant information to managing demand, using performance information, and learning and improvement.

Systematic review

Focus and purpose

25 We carried out a systematic review of the NAO's previous publications to gather additional material for our guide and compare the emerging insights from our

workshops with previous NAO findings on operational management in government.

- We reviewed previous NAO publications, which covered the period 2009–2022, to identify possible case examples to include in our guide.
- We focused our review on two NAO reports which consisted of insights from operational assessments of more than 115 services, provided by 40 government organisations.⁴

Analytical approach

26 We reviewed the NAO publications against a framework to achieve our research aims.

- Potential case examples were identified and recorded in a spreadsheet. They were then assessed against our case study sampling criteria (described in paragraph 20) to determine which examples to use in our guide.
- We reviewed our previous findings on operations management in government against each of the emerging thematic insights generated in our workshops. This helped us to compare the insights we gathered in our workshops with findings from our previous work. Our analysis was also used to provide additional content for the guide, specifically by helping to inform the 'questions to ask' and 'practical tips' content.

⁴ See footnote 2.



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Synthesis, quality assurance and reporting of evidence collected

27 After gathering insights and evidence from multiple research methods, we began the process of synthesising the key points, choosing the guide's key themes, and how to report them. To inform our approach, we asked people from seven services who took part in our workshops for their perspectives on what they wanted from our guide and to test our approach. Our aim was to produce a guide that was accessible, informative and easy to use.

28 We created a matrix which brought together the themes and insights from our workshops and evidence from our other methods, including common findings from our previous work and case studies of good operational practice. This allowed us to:

- decide what good practice to focus our guide on and how to report it. The matrix helped merge and group similar issues to draw out common themes from our entire evidence base. We used it to decide what the guide's overarching insights should be and how best to explain each point. Workshop participants told us their preference was for a web-based, interactive guide and suggested reporting our findings in phases, to make the content more digestible. The matrix allowed us to decide which insights to report under our guide's three themes, ensure there was no duplication, and check the insights were coherent across the themes; and
- test our workshop evidence. We took assurance on the quality of our workshop insights after comparing them with common findings and themes from our previous assessments of government operational performance, as many of the insights aligned. We also tested our insights by sharing findings from individual workshops with others that work in operations management in government. We held three separate discussions with representatives from service teams who expressed an interest in participating in the workshops but were unable to attend the chosen dates. We discussed the key concepts that were raised in the workshop and got interviewees' feedback on how they aligned with their own experience. We also asked a senior government official to provide their reflections on our emerging findings.