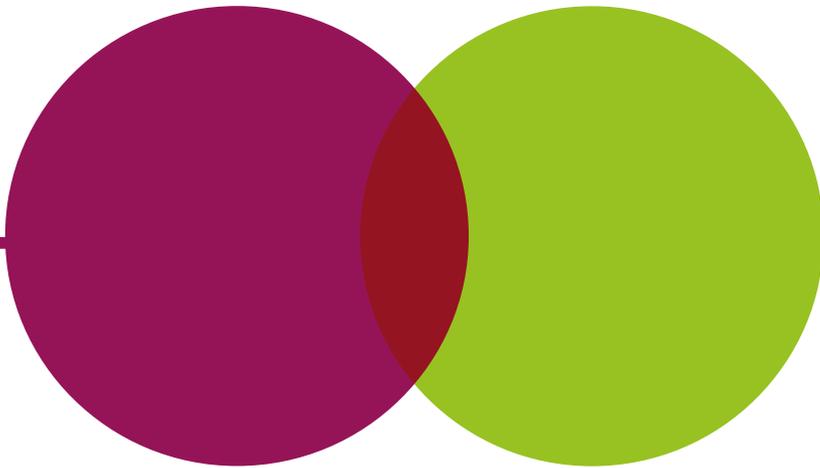




National Audit Office



INSIGHT

# Lessons learned: Cross-government working

Cross-government

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SESSION 2022-23  
7 JULY 2023  
HC 1659



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National Audit Office

# Lessons learned: Cross-government working

Cross-government

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## Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

Ordered by the House of Commons  
to be printed on 5 July 2023

This report has been prepared under Section 6 of the  
National Audit Act 1983 for presentation to the House  
of Commons in accordance with Section 9 of the Act

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**Gareth Davies**  
**Comptroller and Auditor General**  
**National Audit Office**

**3 July 2023**

## 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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# Summary

## Introduction

**1** Central government is organised into departments that plan and deliver their own objectives. Some of these objectives can be met perfectly well by individual departments acting alone. But in some instances, important government priorities such as net zero, adult social care, rough sleeping and vulnerable families cut across departments, and require them to work together, through what is known as cross-government working. In this report we draw on insights from our work to set out what effective cross-government working looks like and highlight some of the barriers. We have also produced a guide to support leaders and practitioners engaged in cross-government working.<sup>1</sup>

### **What is cross-government working?**

**2** Citizens do not usually think of their interactions with government in terms of traditional government departments, and not all issues fit neatly into one part of government. Increasingly, government policies need to involve more than one department and departments are required to work together to achieve policy priorities.

**3** Successful cross-government working (which we have defined as delivering through more than one department or arm's-length body) can allow government to deliver outcomes more effectively and better value for money but requires concerted effort. There are many different types of cross-government working, from sharing best practice between departments to delivering complex programmes that cut across different departmental objectives.

### **How does it work?**

**4** Departments are responsible for the planning and delivery of their objectives and for identifying where cross-government working will help to achieve these. They are also responsible for ensuring they have the right supporting departments lined up to deliver shared priorities and agreeing effective monitoring and governance arrangements to ensure everyone understands their role. Departments set out their priority outcomes in Outcome Delivery Plans (ODPs), along with their plan for achieving them.

<sup>1</sup> National Audit Office, *Cross-government working, Good practice guide for leaders and practitioners*, July 2023.

**5** Both HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office have a role in supporting cross-government priorities. HM Treasury is responsible for allocating and controlling public spending, including departmental spending, and for scrutinising and approving any project or programme spending which is outside of departments' delegated limits or is novel and contentious. Its spending teams advise HM Treasury ministers on decisions at spending reviews; review and approve submissions for new spending on projects and programmes; and monitor departments' budgets and spending risks. The Cabinet Office and HM Treasury are responsible for monitoring the delivery of departmental objectives and 20 cross-cutting outcomes established in October 2021. Both departments have responsibility for identifying, supporting and monitoring cross-government working. In December 2022, HM Treasury and Cabinet Office worked with departments to identify the biggest barriers to successful cross-government working, and identified the following areas to better support departments: structures; priorities; spending; data-sharing; culture; and best practice.

### **Insights from the National Audit Office**

**6** Through our regular examination of government projects and programmes we frequently see examples of how weaknesses in cross-government working can undermine value for money. Findings in our reports regularly highlight problems with cross-government working and reiterate the importance of a shared vision and objectives, coordinated programme and risk management, and compatible data and technology. Our *Guide for effective cross-government working* explores these points, and others, in more detail (**Figure 1** overleaf).

### **Scope of this report**

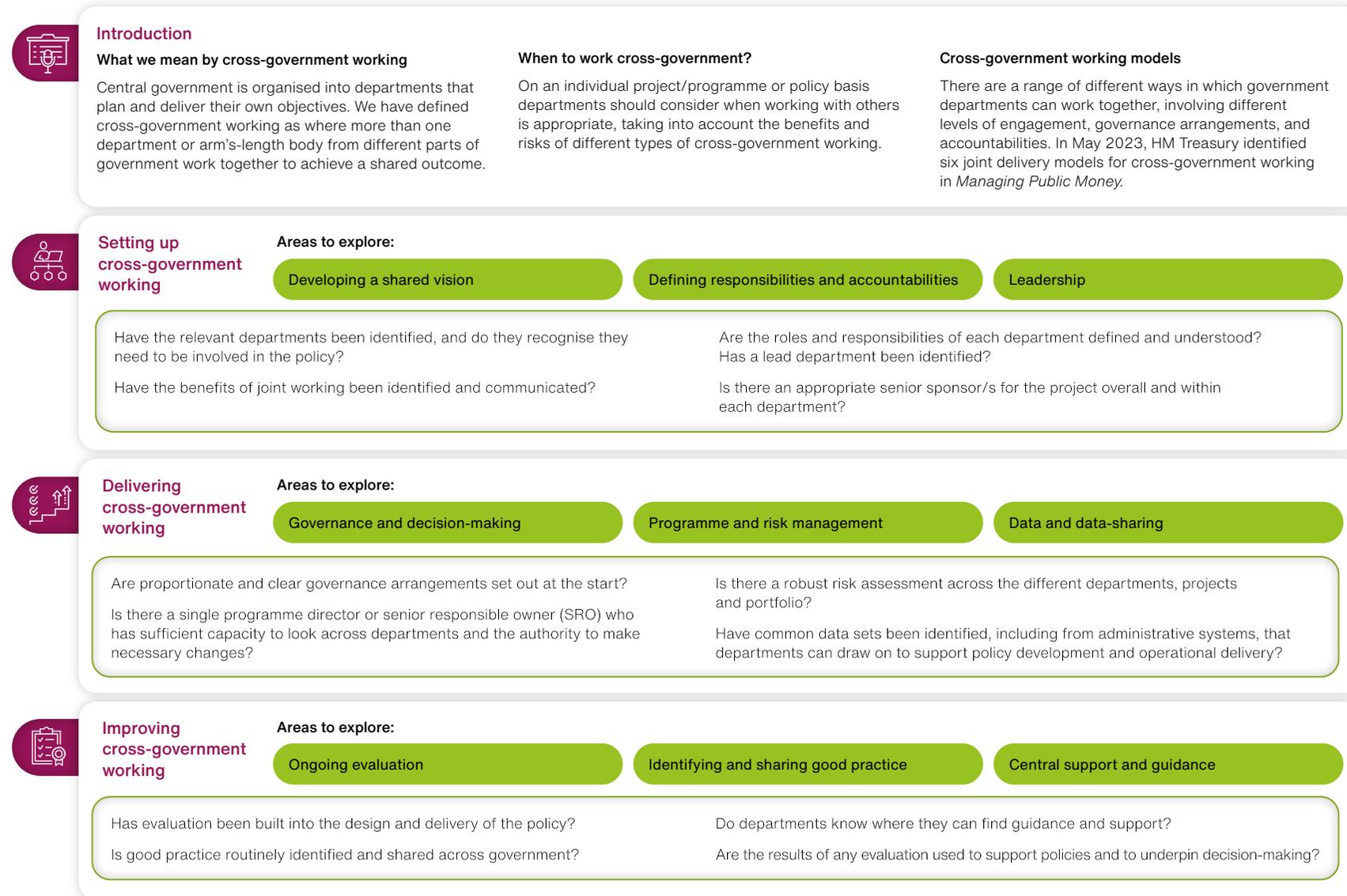
**7** This report draws on insights from our previous work to set out what effective cross-government working looks like and highlights some of the barriers. It covers the roles of Cabinet Office, HM Treasury and government departments in supporting and delivering cross-government work and recent work undertaken by HM Treasury and Cabinet Office to identify barriers to cross-government working. It also considers examples of cross-government working in other countries. The report expands on the main themes of our cross-government working guide and examines:

- setting up cross-government working (Part One);
- delivering cross-government working (Part Two); and
- improving cross-government working (Part Three).

**8** We have defined cross-government working as where more than one department or arm's-length body from different parts of government work together to achieve a shared outcome. The report focuses on the way central government departments and their arm's-length bodies can work together. It does not consider cross-government working with local government, devolved administrations or organisations outside of government.

## Figure 1 Effective cross-government working

Our guide sets out three main areas to consider for effective cross-government working



## Setting up cross-government working

**9 There are many different models of cross-government working.** It can range from two departments working together on a specific policy, such as adult social care, to government priorities delivered by multiple departments, such as net zero. Some departments have overall responsibility for delivering a policy which contributes to other departments' strategic priorities. For example, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport has responsibility for maximising participation in sport, which contributes to strategic priorities across government, such as levelling-up (paragraph 1.4, and Figure 2).

**10 Departments need to carefully consider which policies and programmes will benefit from cross-government working.** Working with more than one department is not always necessary or beneficial, but some policies or programmes cannot be delivered without it. In these circumstances government needs to have a rigorous understanding of its planned outcomes and how they will be delivered when multiple departments are involved (paragraphs 1.4 and 1.15).

**11 It is not always clear which departments are involved in delivering policies which cut across departmental boundaries.** Our work has shown the importance of clearly defined responsibilities and accountability structures, but this does not always happen. Our report on *Support for vulnerable adolescents* found a poor mutual understanding of how different bodies within the health and social care system made decisions. This had hampered joint working. Departments report on their cross-cutting outcomes in ODPs, but we identified one example in the July 2021 ODPs where a shared cross-cutting outcome was not consistently reported by all responsible departments. In addition, some departments used their ODPs to explain where more informal joint working was involved in delivering other outcomes but this was not reflected consistently in the other relevant ODPs (paragraphs 1.7 and 1.9).

**12 Our work shows that departments need strong leadership, a common purpose and shared vision to maximise buy-in and support for cross-government working.** In our 2020 report on *Achieving net zero*, the then Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy told us its latest arrangements were more likely to endure because they had senior political buy-in, including the Prime Minister chairing the Climate Action Strategy Committee. It also established the Climate Change National Strategy Implementation Group, which was made up of senior officials from across departments and helped coordinate activity (paragraph 1.8).

## Delivering cross-government working

**13 Departments need effective governance and decision-making structures for successful cross-government working.** The more bodies that are involved, the more complex it can be to oversee and manage delivery. Our 2022 report into *Government shared services* found that unclear governance arrangements had created risks to delivery and had made it difficult to come to a shared view. Cabinet Office has now begun to streamline its governance arrangements. It is also important that governance arrangements support open discussion and continuous organisational improvement across departmental boundaries (paragraphs 2.2 to 2.4).

**14 Cross-government working can carry more risk, reinforcing the need for effective risk management.** Departments need strong end-to-end risk management arrangements in place that allow government to identify, assess and manage significant risks across government departments. They are supported in this by the Risk Centre of Excellence in HM Treasury and Cabinet Office, which leads on civil contingencies. Our recent report on *The government's preparedness for the COVID-19 pandemic* highlighted several areas for improvement in the way that government assesses risk. We recommended that Cabinet Office should establish who is responsible for leading and managing whole-system risks, and that it should work with government departments to ensure their risk management approaches are comprehensive, integrated, and holistic (paragraph 2.5, and Figure 5).

**15 Departments have a way to go to understand and evaluate the success of cross-government interventions.** Departments must manage common challenges including poor-quality data, lack of consistent data, and impractical data-sharing agreements. In our 2019 report on *Challenges in using data across government* we made it clear that to overcome these barriers, government must take steps towards interoperability by embedding consistent data standards, improving data quality, addressing issues posed by legacy IT systems, and enabling data-sharing across government. This involves departments putting in place data-sharing agreements that address practical considerations including quality, technical limitations, and the cost and effort of making data available. Our recent report on *Digital transformation in government: addressing the barriers to efficiency* found that there had been some recent progress on establishing data standards across government, but that the use of data remains a major undertaking with significant technical and cultural barriers to overcome (paragraphs 2.6 to 2.8).

## Improving cross-government working

**16 Government is taking steps to monitor and evaluate cross-government projects and programmes to understand what works and what does not.** Evaluation allows government to make informed decisions and helps it learn what works. Our 2021 report on *Evaluating government spending* found that 8% of government spend on major projects had robust evaluation plans in place in 2019. It observed that HM Treasury and Cabinet Office have been more proactive on evaluation since 2020. For example, in April 2021, government set up a joint Evaluation Task Force of Cabinet Office and HM Treasury specialists to support evaluation of policies and programmes across government (paragraphs 3.7 and 3.8).

**17 Government could do more to routinely identify and share best practice in cross-government working.** Our *Framework for auditing evaluation* notes the importance of collating evaluation findings and lessons learned so they can be easily accessed and shared. This includes government maintaining a central repository of evaluation evidence, which is kept updated and is accessible to analysts and policy professionals. Our report on *Progress with trade negotiations* recommended that the then Department for International Trade should ensure it learns lessons from the progress it has made on multiple negotiations so far. It should ensure that feedback, learning and sector knowledge from across departments and devolved administrations is recorded and shared, and used to inform an improved approach in future negotiations (paragraphs 3.9 to 3.11).

**18 In December 2022, the centre of government identified where it can do more to support better practice in cross-government working.** Between February 2022 and March 2022, HM Treasury and Cabinet Office carried out an online survey of departmental practitioners to identify the main barriers to cross-government working. They received 229 responses and identified six areas where it was important for departments to work together: structures, priorities, spending, data-sharing, culture and best practice. Some of the surveyed practitioners had found it difficult to locate and apply the relevant guidance on how departments should work together. HM Treasury and Cabinet Office have worked with the cross-government Policy Profession to develop a new joint-working 'hub' to support departments in identifying and establishing cross-cutting accountability structures and clear ways of working, as well as signposting relevant guidance and sources of support (paragraphs 1.14 and 3.2).

**19 Additional funding is often used as an incentive to encourage cross-government working.** As part of the Spending Review 2019, HM Treasury launched the Shared Outcomes Fund to test innovative ways of cross-government working across the public sector, with an emphasis on thorough plans for evaluation. The 2020 and 2021 Spending Reviews allocated an additional £200 million of funding each to the scheme to support both a new round of pilot projects and to scale up or continue existing pilot projects where evaluation has shown they work, bringing the total funding made available through the scheme to £600 million. As at 31 May 2023 the Fund has supported 44 projects. However, there is little incentive for departments to invest in programmes which deliver benefits elsewhere in government. Our work on *Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system* highlighted that costs and benefits are often not spread evenly among implementation partners (paragraphs 3.4 to 3.6, and Figure 6).