

Cross-government working



Good practice guide for leaders and practitioners

July 2023

This guide aims to support policy and delivery professionals across government who are responsible for delivering projects, programmes or policies where more than one department has a role during their development or delivery.

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Communications Team
DP Ref 072154



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The guide

Who is this guide for?

This guide aims to support policy and delivery professionals across government who are responsible for delivering projects, programmes or policies where more than one department has a role during their development or delivery. It aims to support leaders and practitioners.

What does the guide cover?

The guide draws out themes to consider for effective cross-government working. It covers:



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Some of the areas we highlight in this guide can be applied to any project or programme. Cross-government working can often be more challenging to deliver, so it is even more important to get the basics right.




Specific examples from National Audit Office (NAO) reports in this guide reflect the situation when these reports were published. We have not included details of follow-up action departments may have taken to respond to our findings.




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Guide for effective cross-government working



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What we mean by cross-government working


Central government is organised into departments that plan and deliver their own objectives. 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.

When to work cross-government?

On an individual project/programme or policy basis departments should consider when working with others is appropriate, taking into account the benefits and risks of different types of cross-government working.

Cross-government working models

There are a range of different ways in which government departments can work together, involving different levels of engagement, governance arrangements, and accountabilities. In May 2023, HM Treasury identified six joint delivery models for cross-government working in [Managing Public Money](#).



Setting up cross-government working

Areas to explore:


- Developing a shared vision
- Defining responsibilities and accountabilities
- Leadership

Have the relevant departments been identified, and do they recognise they need to be involved in the policy?

Have the benefits of joint working been identified and communicated?

Are the roles and responsibilities of each department defined and understood? Has a lead department been identified?

Is there an appropriate senior sponsor/s for the project overall and within each department?



Delivering cross-government working

Areas to explore:


- Governance and decision-making
- Programme and risk management
- Data and data-sharing

Are proportionate and clear governance arrangements set out at the start?

Is there a single programme director or senior responsible owner (SRO) who has sufficient capacity to look across departments and the authority to make necessary changes?

Is there a robust risk assessment across the different departments, projects and portfolio?

Have common data sets been identified, including from administrative systems, that departments can draw on to support policy development and operational delivery?



Improving cross-government working

Areas to explore:

- Ongoing evaluation
- Identifying and sharing good practice
- Central support and guidance

Has evaluation been built into the design and delivery of the policy?

Is good practice routinely identified and shared across government?

Do departments know where they can find guidance and support?

Are the results of any evaluation used to support policies and to underpin decision-making?



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What we mean by cross-government working

Central government is organised into departments that plan and deliver their own objectives. However, important government priorities such as net zero, adult social care, rough sleeping and vulnerable families cut across departments. Cross-government working is essential to deliver these priorities.

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. There are many ways to do this, from sharing good practice to jointly delivering complex programmes (see [types of cross-government working](#)).

For this guide we have focused on the way central government departments and their arm's-length bodies can work together. We have not included working with local government, devolved administrations or organisations outside of government.





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When to consider cross-government working

Some policies or programmes do not require or benefit from working cross-government, however, at other times it will be beneficial or even essential.

On an individual project/programme basis departments should consider when working with others is appropriate, taking into account:

- government's cross-government priorities;
- whether related policy responsibility is held elsewhere in government;
- how to access expertise, knowledge or data held elsewhere in government;
- whether impacts from interventions may affect the work of other government departments;
- dependencies with activities elsewhere in government; and
- the benefits and risks of cross-government working on the specific issue (see boxes on the right).

Benefits of cross-government working

- Opportunity to address challenging issues which cut across government departments.
- Opportunity to maximise the impact of interventions by ensuring they include a range of policy perspectives and take a long-term and preventative approach.
- Obtaining a range of perspectives provides opportunities to pick the most cost-effective place to intervene to deliver an outcome.
- Opportunity to share good practice and expertise across government.
- Opportunity to limit 'cost-shunting' or unintended outcomes and create savings elsewhere in government.


Risks of cross-government working

- Collaboration and consultation takes time and can result in a project taking longer, being more resource-intensive, or decision-making being slower.
- This additional time can impact the financial costs of the project or programme, which in turn may impact what else government is able to deliver.
- Accountability and funding arrangements for projects may be less clearly defined and more complex.







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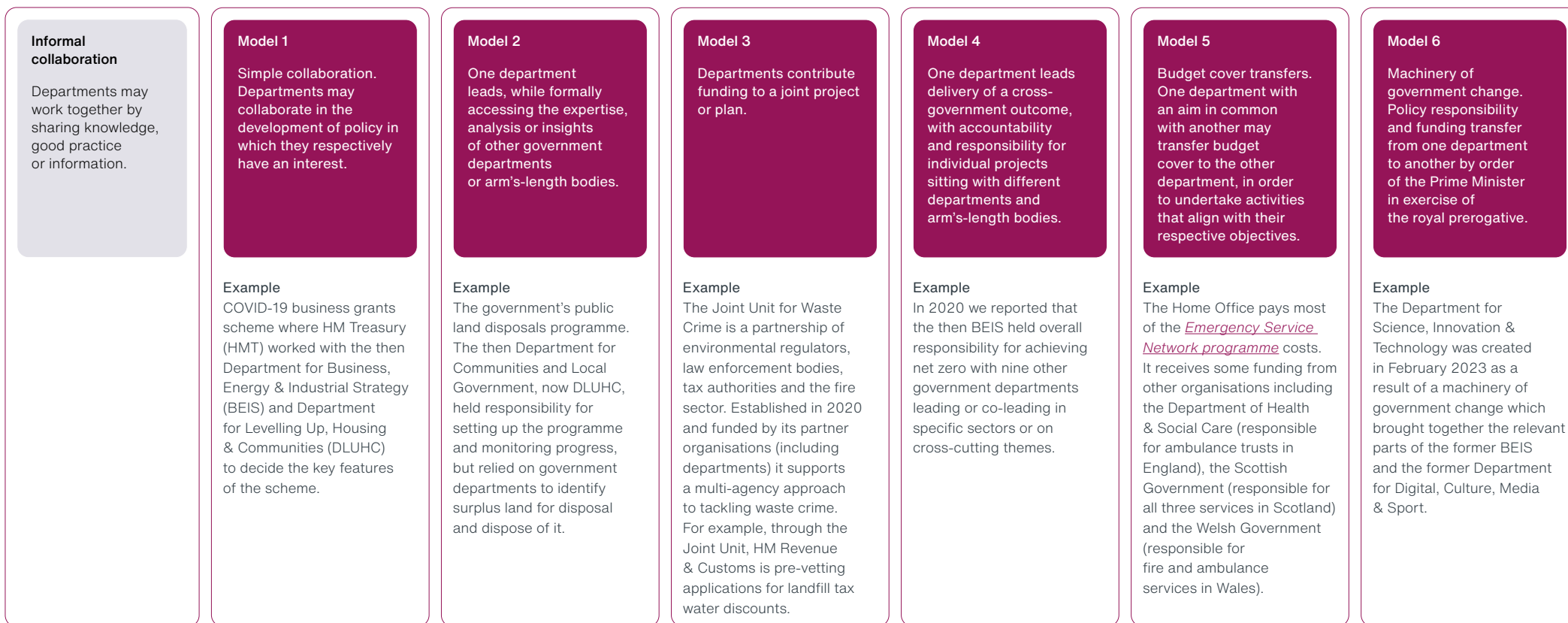
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Cross-government working models

There are a range of different ways in which government departments can work together, involving different levels of engagement, governance arrangements, and accountabilities. In May 2023 HM Treasury identified six joint delivery models for cross-government working in *Managing Public Money*.

Managing Public Money sets out the accounting officer responsibilities for each model. In addition to these models there are more informal ways in which departments can work together, for example sharing good practice. This guide is primarily focused on situations where a high level of cross-government working is required, such as in models 3 and 4.

← HM Treasury's six models of cross-government working (adapted) →





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Before starting a cross-government project or programme it is important that departments involved understand how it interacts with other areas of government policy. Departments should identify where other priorities may be at odds with the objectives of the programme or project as well as who it will be beneficial to work with. Cross-government working is most effective when government identifies a cross-cutting outcome which provides incentives to those involved. As well as developing a shared vision, departments involved need to define and agree roles and responsibilities at the outset, establishing expectations for how they are going to work together.

Developing a shared vision

To achieve the most value from the project or programme, departments should identify interdependencies that exist with other policy areas and government departments. Departments should develop a convincing narrative for why cross-government work is necessary, what it is intended to achieve and how it will provide benefits. A successful cross-government programme will demonstrate clear incentives for all departments involved. This information must be clearly cascaded to officials at all levels. It is also important to identify the right model to use in light of the policy objectives and the level and type of integration required to achieve them (see [types of cross-government working](#)).

Defining responsibilities and accountabilities

Clear accountability structures need to be in place to allow senior leaders to be held to account for delivery. Departments should establish a clear framework for joint working. This should include robust governance structures and clear written agreement between the departments about mutual obligations and responsibilities. It is likely to involve appointing a 'lead' department to oversee delivery.

Leadership

Senior civil servants should provide strong leadership for cross-government working. Leaders should encourage, recognise and reward working collaboratively.

Cross-government projects or programmes need to have senior sponsors and departments should embed expectations about collaborative working in the project or programme's objectives. Cabinet Office may act as the central coordinator and broker between departments to help achieve collective agreement and balance competing priorities ([Managing cross-border travel during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), 2022).

Case study example

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 (NSIG), which was made up of senior officials from across departments and helped coordinate activity.

[Achieving net zero](#), 2020

Case study example

The Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) concluded that the then Department for International Trade had established effective governance arrangements, clear roles and responsibilities, appropriate project management tools, and effective data security arrangements for managing multiple negotiations. The then Department for International Trade had led the delivery of a challenging and intense programme of trade negotiations to a tight timeframe and against the backdrop of uncertainty around the timing and nature of the UK's exit from the EU.

[Progress with trade negotiations](#), 2021



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Developing a shared vision

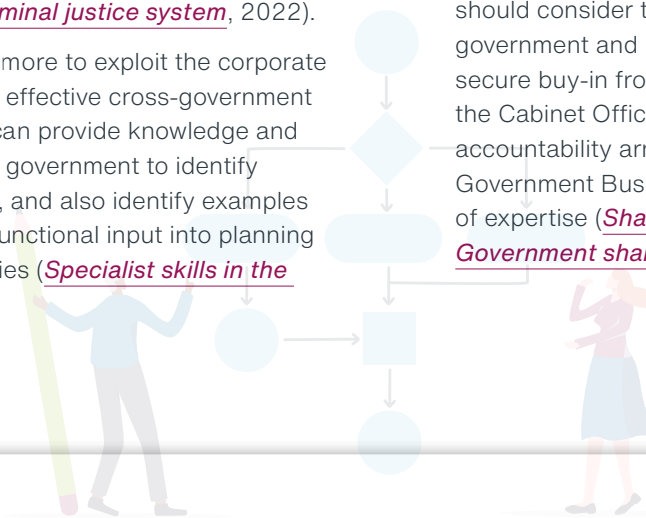
- Departments involved in cross-government work often do not set clearly defined joint and individual objectives and targets. It is important to have a common purpose and vision in encouraging buy-in from departments, which is vital for an initiative to achieve its intended cost savings ([Government shared services](#), 2022).
- Departments' unwillingness to prioritise and balance competing objectives is an entrenched problem. Departments often take separate narrow views and the business planning process does not help to break down government silos ([Improving government's planning and spending framework](#), 2018). Government has a poor understanding of how different projects and programmes impact on policy areas ([Support for vulnerable adolescents](#), 2022).

Defining responsibilities and accountabilities

- It is important to have clearly defined responsibilities and accountability structures when public service outcomes are to be achieved through the contribution of more than one body, but often this does not happen. This makes decision-making more difficult and has hampered joint working ([Support for vulnerable adolescents](#), 2022).
- Lines of accountability are unclear and so government's oversight of bodies involved in cross-government work often has gaps and is not proportionate. Accountability structures are essential in holding senior leadership to account for progress in delivering outcomes ([Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system](#), 2022).
- Government can do more to exploit the corporate functions to support effective cross-government working. Functions can provide knowledge and insights from across government to identify cross-cutting issues, and also identify examples of best practice on functional input into planning and spending activities ([Specialist skills in the civil service](#), 2020).

Leadership

- Departments leading cross-government objectives have previously struggled with implementation and ensuring all departments play their part. This can be as a result of the objective not being given sufficient priority in budget allocations by all departments, or because wider government accountability and planning structures have not encouraged collaboration across departments. There also needs to be sufficient capability across the system in terms of technical and behavioural skills and routine sharing of information and learning across departments ([Achieving net zero](#), 2020).
- We previously recommended that Cabinet Office should consider the role of the centre of government and provide clear leadership to secure buy-in from departments. In response, the Cabinet Office put in place new governance and accountability arrangements including a team within Government Business Services to act as a centre of expertise ([Shared service centres](#), 2016 and [Government shared services](#), 2022).



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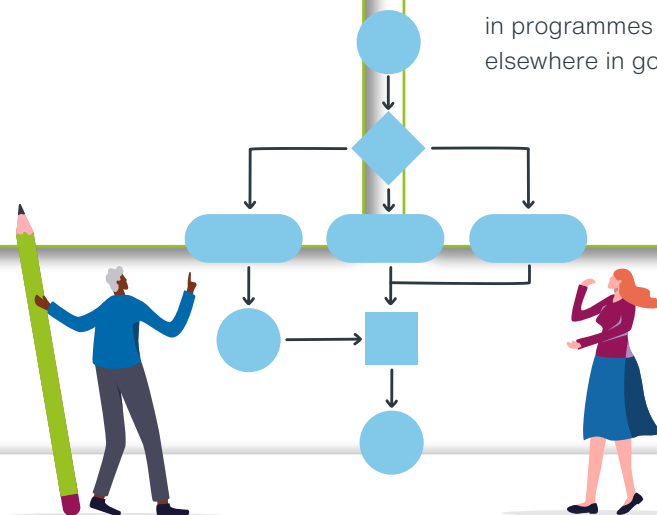
- Have the relevant departments been identified, and do they recognise they need to be involved in the policy?
- Has the policy been captured in departments' Outcome Delivery Plans (ODPs) as a cross-government priority?
- Does the policy contradict or cut across existing ones?
- Have the benefits of joint working been identified and communicated?

Defining responsibilities and accountabilities

- Are the roles and responsibilities of each department defined and understood? Has a lead department been identified?
- Are agreed joint objectives in place?
- Are accountabilities for delivery and reporting lines clear? Are the right people involved?
- Are these arrangements set out in a terms of reference or written working agreement?

Leadership

- Is there an appropriate senior sponsor/s for the project/programme overall and within each department?
- Are ministers and accounting officers setting the expectation to deliver collaboratively?
- Are there established ways of cross-government working between departments so that it is encouraged and supported?
- Can the centre of government help to incentivise departments to invest in programmes which deliver benefits elsewhere in government?





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Once departments have defined roles and responsibilities they should set up and agree governance arrangements and reporting routes. These should be made as simple as possible, to avoid common pitfalls of complexity and duplication. Those leading the project or programme should regularly review its success to ensure that it is on track to achieve its objectives and realise the benefits calculated at the outset. Departments should use data to underpin policy and make evidence-based decisions. Departments should also use data to support regular discussions between partnering departments to review performance, hold each other to account, and identify and assess emerging risks.

Governance and decision-making

The day-to-day processes for managing the programme should be simple and understood by those involved, with minimal duplication of effort. Putting in place robust structures and governance frameworks (such as an SRO from the lead department) are vital to helping mitigate those risks to cross-government working associated with managing constant change and staff turnover. Good governance also helps maximise opportunities.

Programme and risk management

For effective cross-government working, departments should manage risks by setting clear short-, medium- and long-term objectives. Clear communication between departments will help strengthen relationships and ensure resources are used effectively. It is also important to integrate progress and spend monitoring across the programme, to highlight risk areas and inform decision-making. There should be a clear and consistent understanding of, and approach to, risk management. Departments should set key performance indicators to reflect the desired joint outcomes. Departments involved should share access to, and understanding of, performance metrics and spend data across departments to support this and this information should be used regularly in decision-making.

Data and data-sharing

Good-quality and joined-up data sets are essential for supporting good, evidence-based decision-making. The lead departments need a holistic view of all available data sets across the departments involved in delivering the joint priority outcome. Departments should agree timely access to appropriate data sets, linking them where necessary to improve their value.

Case study example

High-profile policy proposals can provide the impetus to get good data-sharing arrangements in place. For example, HM Revenue & Customs shares real-time PAYE information with the Department for Work & Pensions so that entitlement to Universal Credit can be calculated. This was a complex project, with data architects from both departments working for several years to make the data systems compatible. This shows how policy imperatives, collaborative working and continued commitment, despite the difficulties and complexities, can achieve results.

[Challenges in using data across government](#), 2019

Case study example

The 'cross-government data-sharing project', led by the Department for Education, includes plans to link the national pupil database with four health data sets, as well as to explore the feasibility of linking the police national computer database with Home Office crime data. The Ministry of Justice-led 'Better outcomes through linked data programme' aims to show how linking and improving government data improves the support provided for those with complex needs. The programme will run until March 2024 and its findings will be used to deliver changes to how government supports those in need. These projects were funded by HM Treasury's Shared Outcomes Fund.

[Support for vulnerable adolescents](#), 2022



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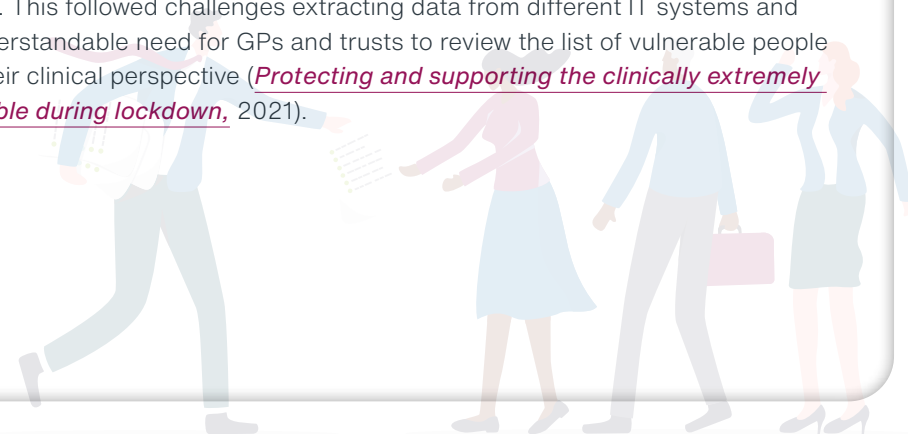
- Where governance is not well thought through, it can lead to duplicated effort and disjointed decision-making. HM Treasury told us that these multiple layers of governance are not conducive to good decision-making or coming to a joint view on what matters ([Government shared services](#), 2022).
- Introducing cross-government participation in governance has formed part of departments' work to update their accountability approaches, although this does not by itself provide departments the oversight necessary to make informed decisions ([Regulating to achieve environmental outcomes](#), 2023).

Programme and risk management

- Departments do not always have necessary performance monitoring and risk management processes agreed at the outset. When we published our report on *Achieving net zero*, the then Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, along with the other departments involved, was yet to put in place all the effective components of cross-government working, such as effective progress monitoring to meet a challenging target and plans to manage risks associated with the 'collective ownership' of net zero arrangements ([Achieving net zero](#), 2020).
- Monitoring progress and outputs is essential to effective programme management. Departments do not always identify and measure key performance indicators (KPIs) that are relevant, well-defined and timely. However, the Department for Energy Security & Net Zero, with other departments, has started to establish a process for monitoring progress systematically across the Net Zero Research and Innovation Framework but is still to define what outcomes it is seeking to deliver and what level of risk it will tolerate ([Support for innovation to deliver net zero](#), 2023).

Data and data-sharing

- The government does not consistently join up data sets, which makes it difficult to understand the risks that adolescents are exposed to in a holistic way. However, there has been some systematic work across government to join up data sets to understand the link between risk factors and adverse outcomes and how these overlap. Without this work government cannot have a joined-up picture of the nature and scale of the adverse impacts faced by adolescents, particularly where there are overlapping adverse outcomes ([Support for vulnerable adolescents](#), 2022).
- Legislative changes in 2017 allowed for the sharing of personal data between public authorities to improve how public services are delivered to improve the well-being of individuals and households. However, some departments have mistakenly believed they cannot apply the rules to their own circumstances ([Challenges in using data across government](#), 2019).
- Although the need to support was urgent during lockdown, it took time for people to be identified as clinically extremely vulnerable, and therefore access formal support. This followed challenges extracting data from different IT systems and the understandable need for GPs and trusts to review the list of vulnerable people from their clinical perspective ([Protecting and supporting the clinically extremely vulnerable during lockdown](#), 2021).



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Governance and decision-making

- Are proportionate and clear governance arrangements set out at the start?
- Is there an agreed risk appetite and clear escalation routes for risks that exceed this?
- Are decisions made with the appropriate involvement of departments concerned?
- Is the route to making decisions communicated to all?
- Have regular check-ins been established to ensure the governance arrangements in place are still correct and operating in a way that works for all?

Programme and risk management

- Are constituent parts of the programme monitored at the portfolio level?
- Is there a single programme director or SRO who has sufficient capacity to look across departments and the authority to make necessary changes?
- Is there a robust risk assessment across the different departments, projects and overall portfolio?
- Is it clear where money needs to be spent, by whom and what the impact of this will be?
- Has a consistent approach to measuring benefits been agreed?

Data and data-sharing

- Have common data sets been identified, including from administrative systems, that departments can draw on to support policy development and operational delivery?
- Are those involved aware of what data exist and what plans need to be put in place to ensure that these data are collected?
- How can departments share programme impact data with other relevant departments so the overall impact is assessed?
- Have data-sharing arrangements been agreed by all departments involved in the initiative?





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Departments should build in evaluation points at the design phase that are observed through the lifecycle of the programme. Where good practice is identified, departments should share it across government and use it to develop guidance to support other departments in learning how to deliver effectively.

Ongoing evaluation

Our audit framework for [Evaluating government spending](#) (2022) noted that evaluation allows government to make informed decisions and helps it learn what works. This allows for improved design and implementation of future initiatives and a greater likelihood of objectives being achieved. Government has taken steps to undertake more evaluation, setting up the Evaluation Task Force, a joint unit staffed by Cabinet Office and HM Treasury specialists whose job it is to ensure that robust evidence on the effectiveness of policies and programmes sits at the heart of government spending decisions.

Identifying and sharing good practice

Government should routinely identify and share good practice in how departments can work across government effectively.

Central support and guidance

Departments working on cross-government projects and programmes should have access to advice and support on how to work across government effectively. This should include open discussions between the departments involved about what works well and where improvements are needed, and by drawing on central advice and support.

This support should include information on how to access additional funding through central initiatives, such as the Shared Outcomes Fund, which was designed to support cross-government working with a particular focus on evaluation and developing insights into what works.

Case study example

The Ministry of Justice published a cross-government agreement to improve outcomes for women in or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system in January 2021. It sets out how government and its other partners should work together at a local and national level and includes an action plan to which 14 signatories across government departments and public bodies signed up. It also gives best-practice examples for implementing a whole-system approach.

[*Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system*, 2022](#)

Case study example

Departments and arm's-length bodies (ALBs) wanted the Cabinet Office to facilitate more good-practice sharing and networking with similar organisations across government. As part of Cabinet Office's 2021 strategic review of ALBs it highlighted improved information-sharing, and new training programmes and guidance as priority areas. This included a new non-executive director induction programme and guidance on appraisal and review of boards.

[*Central oversight of arm's-length bodies*, 2021](#)





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Ongoing evaluation

- Departments often do not develop and publish comprehensive and robust evaluation strategies setting out how the government might assess the impact of its intervention. These strategies should include plans to evaluate its main programmes and commitments; work with other government departments to do the same; and work with government and third-sector organisations to develop the evidence base of what works, including the costs and benefits of different options, to aid funding decisions (*Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system*, 2022).
- There is evidence of departments committing to improving their monitoring and evaluation for initiatives, for example the Local Growth Fund, but it is at an early stage with further work needed to translate good intentions into practical changes (*Supporting local economic growth*, 2022).

Identifying and sharing good practice

- In order to avoid repeating past mistakes, departments must learn from their experiences and use this learning to shape current initiatives. For example, Cabinet Office now has an end-to-end risk management framework for its shared services strategy. The Cabinet Office encouraged clusters to complete a 'lessons identified' assessment to show how they have addressed past recommendations. However, at the time of publication we had seen no evidence that clusters had completed this assessment, hindering their ability to avoid repeating past mistakes (*Government shared services*, 2022).

- Departments should use past learning to inform an improved approach in future. The Department for International Trade should ensure it learns lessons from the progress it has made on multiple trade 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 (*Progress with trade negotiations*, 2021).
- Government is not taking full advantage of opportunities to bring together evaluation findings, extract the learning, and apply lessons across different departments. Nor is government capturing or publicising how evaluations lead to improved outcomes. At the time of publishing our report on *Evaluating government spending* (2021), we identified examples like these were commonly held at departmental level.

Central support and guidance

- In the absence of central good practice operational guidance, departments have developed customised guidance. This has led to duplication of effort across departments and numerous guidance documents (*Financial modelling in government*, 2022).
- HM Treasury told us that at the 2021 Spending Review it had encouraged departments to ensure bids were aligned. It also told us it had improved its processes to support joint departmental bids, such as by providing departments with guidance and training. HM Treasury had seen an increase in join-up between departments, such as between the Department for Education and the Department of Health & Social Care on family hubs. However, HM Treasury considered that there was further to go to ensure joined-up spending plans between departments (*Support for vulnerable adolescents*, 2022).

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Ongoing evaluation

- Has evaluation been built into the design and delivery of the policy?
- Are the results of any evaluation used to support policies and to underpin decision-making?
- Does the team responsible for evaluation have sufficient 'evaluation literacy' to understand the evidence before making decisions?

Identifying and sharing good practice

- Is good practice routinely identified?
- Is this good practice shared across government?
- Does the centre of government support departments to learn lessons when things go wrong?

Central support and guidance

- Do partner departments have access to a point of support within the lead department?
- Do departments know where they can find guidance and support?
- Are departments using central funding mechanisms to support joint working?





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Further resources



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Good practice guide: Delivery Environment Complexity Analytic (DECA), 2022 – on ensuring good relationships between delivery partners

Lessons learned from Major Programmes, 2020 – on setting strategic objectives

Integration across government, 2013 – on how clear leadership contributes to an integrated approach



Delivering cross-government working

Improving government data: A guide for senior leaders, 2022 – on the importance of collecting and sharing good-quality data

Evaluating government spending: an audit framework, 2022 – on piloting and evaluating output and outcome metrics

Challenges in using data across government, 2019 – on understanding the legislation that governs data-sharing between departments



Improving cross-government working

Improving services – systematic improvement, 2023 – on learning from and improving cross-government working

Evaluating government spending: an audit framework, 2022 – on good practice for evaluating government spend

Framework to review portfolios, 2022 – on where portfolio thinking is valuable and what has worked well and less well

Framework to review programmes, 2021 – on the importance of measuring and assessing progress