Infrastructure
and Projects
Authority

Undertaking Project and Programme Assurance Reviews

A Briefing Note for the Review Team

Introduction

This note provides the Review Team with key information about their role in a forthcoming assurance review (the Review) and outlines responsibilities and actions needed to enable full participation in a successful review. It acts as a reminder of the key points that were covered in the assurance reviewer training.

Upon agreeing to be part of the Review Team, you will have been advised what assurance review you are undertaking e.g., Gate Review, Project Assessment Review (PAR) or Assurance of Action Plan (AAP). This briefing note will not go into details about the specific type of reviews, but it is designed to provide you with information in increasing levels of details, should you require it.

This briefing note is written primarily for High Risk programme/project reviews arranged and managed by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA). However, this briefing note can be adopted for reviews managed by departments under delegated authority. In such circumstances, the Departmental Assurance Coordinator (DAC) effectively replaces the role outlined for the IPA Assurance Lead (AL).

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1. Review Team Roles and Responsibilities

The Review Team roles and responsibilities are as follows:

- The **IPA AL** has overall responsibility to the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO), the authority (department/organisation), the IPA and HM Treasury, for arranging and managing the review;
- The **RTL** is responsible for leading the Review Team and delivering the review and its report.
- The **RTL** acts as the owner of the review process from the planning meeting, through the review itself to the successful delivery of the final review report and for the provision of appropriate feedback;
- Each **RTM** is an essential part of the Review Team. They will have been selected because of their background, experience and specialist skills, which are needed to make the review successful.

It is essential that, having made the commitment to undertake the review, the Review Team makes the time available to attend the planning meeting and carry out the pre-reading in advance of the review. During the review, the Review Team must be fully focussed on the review. The RTL and RTMs should not agree to be part of the review unless they are able to commit 100% to it.

Throughout the review, the Review Team should work in partnership with the IPA and the authority.

Review Teams are asked to note that IPA Assurance Reviews are independent and are delivered on behalf of the Accounting Officer (AO).

The role of the Review Team Leader (RTL) in an Assurance Review

The RTL's responsibilities can be summarised as:

- Working with the RTMs to collect and evaluate evidence in order to assess whether the programme/project is well managed and controlled, likely to succeed and is ready to proceed to the next stage in the delivery lifecycle;
- Having overall control of the delivery of the review report;
- Working with the Review Team to check that the recommendations from any previous assurance review have been implemented or that appropriate progress is being made;
- Ensuring that the Review Team highlight the key risks, issues or concerns to deliverability of the project/ programme objectives. Recommendations should be aligned to the resolution and management of these and the Stage Gate Assessment (SGA) is based on the severity and urgency of these risks;
- Ensuring that the Review Team records high impact blockers that are outside of the programme/project's control;
- Ensuring that throughout the review, the SRO is kept abreast of emerging findings. This will normally take place at the end of each day. Open and honest interaction with the SRO and other appropriate personnel is critical;
- The RTL can recommend that the programme/project is not fit to proceed to the next stage, stopped, re-baselined etc. However, it is important to understand that the RTL does not have the authority to stop the programme/project, theirs is purely an advisory role;

- The RTL should be as clear and as robust as necessary to highlight issues which may impact on the effective delivery of the project/ programme (further guidance can be found in the section on writing the report);
- Where used, provide an overall assessment of the Delivery Confidence status (**see section 7**) which is based on the severity and urgency of the identified risk based recommendations.
- On High Risk programmes or projects, if the SGA is Red, the RTL must discuss this with the AL and the Project Delivery Advisor (PDA) before presentation to the SRO; and
- Providing feedback on the RTM and accepting performance feedback from the RTMs and the SRO.

The role of the Review Team Member (RTM) in an Assurance Review

The RTM's responsibilities can be summarised as:

- Working with the RTL and the other RTMs to collect and evaluate evidence in order to assess whether the programme/project is being well managed and controlled and likely to succeed and is ready to proceed to the next stage in the delivery lifecycle;
- Supporting the RTL in writing and delivering the review report;
- Working together to check that the recommendations from any previous assurance reviews have been implemented or that appropriate progress is being made;
- Ensuring that the Review Team highlights the key risks, issues or concerns to deliverability of the project/programme objectives. Recommendations should be aligned to resolution and management of these and the SGA is based on the severity and urgency of these risks;
- Ensuring that the Review Team record high impact blockers that are outside of the programme/project's control;
- Ensuring there are no surprises for the SRO during the review by discussing emerging findings at the end of each day. Open and honest interaction with the SRO and other appropriate personnel is critical;
- The Review Team can recommend that the programme/project is not fit to proceed to the next stage, stopped, re-baselined etc. However, it is important to understand that they **do not** have the authority to stop the programme/project, The Review Team's role is purely advisory;
- Where used, provide an overall assessment of the Stage Gate status (**see section 7**) which is based on the severity and urgency of the identified risk based recommendations.
- Providing feedback on the RTL and accepting performance feedback from the RTL.

2. Before the Planning Meeting

Review Team Leader (RTL)

Contacting the IPA AL:
The RTL will need to have a pre-planning meeting discussion with the AL to discuss the planning meeting agenda, the Terms of Reference for the review and for them to be briefed on any wider issues, which may be affecting the programme/project. The RTL should keep in contact with the AL before, during and after the review, until the final review report is issued and feedback is completed.

If you are concerned about potential conflicts of interest, you should advise the AL as soon as possible.

Contacting the SRO and Programme/Project Manager:
The RTL should contact the SRO or, failing that, the Programme/Project Manager (PPM) as soon as they have received the review confirmation email from the IPA Review Team Resourcer (RTR) to discuss the purpose of the Review , finalise the planning meeting agenda and to get a feel for issues concerning the programme/project. Once the planning meeting agenda is finalised, the RTL should distribute it to the programme/project team, the other review team members and the AL.

Contacting your Review Team Members:
The RTL should make contact with each RTM before the planning meeting to confirm the date, time and location of the meeting. The RTL should also request a short pen portrait from each review team member to provide to the programme/project.

The RTL should check that the RTMs are aware of their role. The RTL will need to be prepared to answer questions and address concerns, particularly if this is a RTM's first assurance review. In some instances, one of the RTMs may be an individual from the Major Projects Leadership Academy (MPLA) programme. A requirement of the programme is that the individual should participate in at least one High Risk assurance review and then write an assignment about the experience. Generally, this will be the first time they have participated in a review.

Review Team Members (RTM)

The RTL will make contact with the RTMs prior to the planning meeting, usually once they have made contact with the SRO (and Programme/Project Manager) to confirm the date, time and location of the planning meeting and agree a draft agenda.

If you are concerned about potential conflicts of interest, you should advise the RTL and the AL as soon as possible. The RTL will answer any queries or concerns the RTM may have about the forthcoming review.

3. The Planning Meeting

The planning meeting is an essential part of the assurance review process for a number of reasons. It may be the first time members of the Review Team will have met each other and worked with the RTL. It gives an opportunity for the Review Team to discuss how best to work together and establish a Code of Conduct applicable to the review, the Review Team and the SRO.

The planning meeting will also enable team members to familiarise themselves with the programme/project, identify the key potential issues that need reviewing and identify those Stakeholders to be interviewed. It is also an opportunity to discuss and address any concerns that the SRO or the programme/project team may have.

The planning meeting is also used to finalise the logistics for the review, the interview schedules, the documentation requirements and Review Terms of Reference.

The RTL should chair the planning meeting, which is normally divided into four parts (the planning meeting should be scheduled for approx., 3 hours):

- **First session:** The Review Team initially meets with the AL and the RTM to sort out the team dynamics, logistics and consider what approach they will adopt to ensure a successful review. The AL will outline the position and any concerns, if relevant.

- **Second session:** The SRO and programme/project representatives join the meeting. The SRO will provide an overview of the programme/project, outline the progress, challenges, risks and areas of concern they would like addressed during the review. This information will help the Review Team to familiarise themselves with the programme/project and identify the key potential issues to be addressed during the review. This will also enable the Terms of Reference for the review to be finalised and agreed and to identify the key stakeholders to be interviewed.
- **Third session:** The programme/project team and the Review Team finalise the interviewee list, documentation requirements and logistical matters for the review (the SRO is not required for this session).
- **Fourth session (optional):** The programme/project team leaves the meeting, and the Review Team and the AL align on the review plan and any personal logistics.

A generic **Planning Meeting Agenda** is available to enable the appropriate management of the meeting.

The AL will normally attend the planning meeting to facilitate or assist where necessary, provide the latest view of the programme/project from an IPA/Cabinet Office/HMT perspective and ensure that the correct process for the review is followed.

It should be made clear to the SRO and the PPM that a review is not an audit and that the Review Team is there to help the programme/project succeed. It is important to acknowledge that assurance reviews are jointly owned by the department and IPA, or other delegated authority. All programme/project reviews with a Red SGA will need to be reported to the Accounting Officer (AO), HMT and CO Officials in order to proactively escalate and agree next steps.

An **Interview Schedule Template** should have been made available to the programme/project team to complete and share with the Review Team at the planning meeting. It can be used to confirm or amend, as necessary, the list of participants for the review. The Review Team will also agree with the programme/project, which documents it will need to see in advance of the review and agree the logistics of getting those documents to the team. The list of required documents should align to the documents outlined in the relevant Gate Review Workbook. It is critical that the Review Team have access to key programme/ project documents within a timeframe that allows for appropriate understanding to be gained.

The review should be seen as a partnership between the SRO and the Review Team to increase the programme's/project's chances of success. Being open and honest with the programme/project team is key to the success of the review and the Review Team should expect the same in return.

Code of Conduct
The **Code of Conduct** is a statement of principles that the Review Team will adopt to ensure that a consistent professional approach is adopted throughout the review. The RTL will be expected to develop and agree its adoption.

The Code of Conduct should be agreed by the Review Team at the start of the planning meeting, written down and discussed with the SRO. Establishing a Code of Conduct is essential to ensuring that the Review Team and the SRO adopt uniform working practices and standards.

Typical items in a Code of Conduct include:

- Open and honest contributions;
- Valuing diversity/difference;
- Maintaining confidentiality;
- Comments will be non-attributable;
- Robust management of time;
- Valuing best practice as well as identifying areas for improvement;
- Independence and objectivity;
- Team working;
- Learning experience;
- A commitment to providing a report that gives value to the programme/project and its stakeholders;
- Appropriate triangulation of evidence; and
- The review is a forward looking strategic review and is not an audit.

4. Between the Planning Meeting and the Assurance Review

At the planning meeting a number of key documents will have been identified for the Review Team to read in advance of the review. The RTL, in discussion with the RTMs, will determine which documents all members should read and which should be allocated to an individual member so as to share the workload.

It is essential that Review Team members allocate sufficient time, prior to the review, to undertake this reading. This reading, in conjunction with the Gate Review Workbooks, should help to identify key areas of inquiry to probe during the review.

The guidance from the Gate Review Workbooks and the pre-reading will be triangulated with the evidence from the assurance review interviews to help reach an overall conclusion on the SGA **(see Section 7)** for the programme/project.

5. During the Assurance Review

Throughout the review, the Review Team should collaborate with the SRO and key stakeholders. The Review Team should collectively be cognizant of the environment (e.g. political, operational, financial etc.), which the programme/project is in, to ensure that the appropriate approach and context is duly considered. Most assurance reviews adopt a “top-down” approach and the Review Team should avoid being drawn too far down into the detail.

Interviews should be open and frank discussions. The Review Team should not have preconceived ideas about the outcomes of the review. Views expressed by interviewees should be non-attributable and confidentiality should always be maintained.

Where workshops are used during a review, The RTL may wish to ask one of the RTMs to lead the facilitation for a period, they will also support the team with note taking and time keeping.

The RTL should ensure full participation of the RTMs and that the workload is shared fairly among the Review Team. Again views expressed should be non-attributable.

All of the Review Team will be expected to fully participate in gathering information, be that through participating in interviews or facilitating workshops. The RTL will agree with the RTMs, initially at the planning meeting, and then each day as the review progresses, the allocation of responsibilities.

During the review, all of the Review Team will be expected to take notes and evaluate the findings. Triangulation of the information obtained from the interviews and/or workshops, along with the reading undertaken, together with their knowledge and experience, will enable the Review Team to draw conclusions and identify issues for the report. If one of the Review Team has specific experience or are considered to be a “subject matter expert”, their knowledge, experience and opinions will be vital in delivering a successful review.

There could be times during the review where the RTL may be required to support, advise and/or coach the RTMs about the assurance review process, especially if they are new to the role. The RTL is expected to support the RTMs throughout the review.

6. Emerging Findings

Whilst undertaking an assurance review, it is essential that an open and honest agenda and dialogue is maintained with the programme/project team and the SRO. It is essential throughout the review that the Review Team works in partnership with all stakeholders to ensure that the objectives are achieved.

Typically emerging findings meetings are held at the end of each day of the review. The Review Team should meet with the SRO, who may have with them someone from the programme/project team (it is suggested that this is the Programme/Project Director). It is recognised that a face to face meeting every day may not be practical and should this be the case, a discussion with the RTL will be required to find an alternative solution (e.g. a telephone conversation or having a suitable deputy to stand in at the SRO’s discretion). However, the SRO must be available for feedback on the final day.

Emerging finding meetings are intended to enable the Review Team to share their early thoughts with the SRO on the way the review is progressing, ensure that the SRO is kept abreast of any emerging findings, clarify any points of uncertainty and discuss any misinterpretation or correct any factual inaccuracies. They are also used to secure any additional information/evidence from the programme/project and to capture any additional matters which should be explored during the interviews.

7. Writing the Assurance Review Report

The assurance review report will be based on a template that is provided by the IPA. Please do not make any changes to the template without discussing and agreeing them with the AL first.

Stage Gate Assessment (SGA)

The Gate Review Assurance Report will include a SGA with an associated Red/Amber/Green (RAG) status.

The Stage Gate Assessment (SGA) will be based on the following definitions:

Colour	Criteria Description
Green	Successful delivery of the programme/project to time, cost and quality appears highly likely and there are no major outstanding issues that at this stage appear to threaten delivery. ***Recommendation: The programme/project is ready to proceed to the next stage.***
Amber	Successful delivery of the programme/project to time, cost and quality appears feasible but significant issues already exist requiring management attention. These appear resolvable at this stage and, if addressed promptly, should not present a cost/schedule overrun. ***Recommendation: This programme/project can proceed to the next stage with conditions but the programme/project must report back to the IPA and HMT on the satisfaction of each time bound condition within an agreed timeframe.***
Red	Successful delivery of the programme/project to time, cost and quality appears to be unachievable. There are major issues which, at this stage, do not appear to be manageable or resolvable. The programme/project may need re-baselining and/or its overall viability re-assessed. ***Recommendation: This programme/project should not proceed to the next phase until these major issues are managed to an acceptable level of risk and the viability of the project/programme has been re-confirmed.***

Please consult **Guide to Preparing an Assurance Report** for more detailed guidance on developing a SGA.

All of the Review Team Members will be expected to play a full part in helping to determine the SGA from the evidence gained during the review. The RTL will take responsibility for presenting the draft review report to the SRO on the final day. The RTL may ask the RTMs, with their agreement, to present sections of the report. In some cases, the RTL may consult the IPA before discussing the report with the SRO.

At the presentation of the review report, the SRO should be asked to consider if there are any factual or grammatical corrections to be made and to advise the RTL accordingly. If there are significant factual changes, the RTL should consult with the RTMs about any subsequent changes to the report. The RAG status is non-negotiable. The final review report should be delivered to the SRO within 5 working days of the review concluding.

If the programme/ project receives an overall SGA RAG status of Red, and it is on the Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP), the AL will be advised by the RTL. Any programme/project with a Red SGA will be reported to the Accounting Officer (AO), and other HMT and CO Officials in order to proactively escalate and agree next steps.

Where a SGA is Red, the review team should discuss with the SRO, and other appropriate stakeholders, the need for a follow up Assurance of Action Plan (AAP) review to assess progress on action to address the critical recommendations. An AAP review should occur within 8 to 10 weeks.

Summary of Concerns, Evidence and Recommendations

In the assurance review report the Review Team is asked to record the key risks or particular concerns observed by the Review Team that will severely impact deliverability of the programme/project. All recommendations should be aligned to resolution and management of these and the SGA should be based on the severity and urgency of these risks. All review team members are expected to help formulate the recommendations.

There should be a clear relationship between the risks and concerns identified and the SGA, particularly in relation to the programme/project's ability to deliver to time, cost and quality. The review team should discuss these relationships explicitly.

Priority	Recommendation	Risk and Issues Identified with Evidence	Classification	Timing
1.	Commence recruitment activity of specialist vacancies.	There is a risk that if functional specialist vacancies are not quickly filled, then the Programme will not keep to Schedule.	Resource and Specialist Management.	Essential: as soon as practically possible.

Note: the term 'risk' is NOT intended to be used in a pure project management context. Risk is intended to cover areas of concern or problems identified during the review. These risks may relate to strategic viability, economic viability, commercial viability, financial viability, and project and programme management viability.

Each risk based recommendation should be recorded in order of priority impact and should be recorded as Critical, Essential or Recommended, see definitions below:

- **Critical (Do Now):** *To increase the likelihood of a successful outcome it is of the greatest importance that the programme/project should take action immediately.*
- **Essential (Do By):** *To increase the likelihood of a successful outcome the programme/project should take action in the near future. [Note to review teams – whenever possible Essential risk based recommendations should be linked to programme/project milestones e.g. before contract signature and/or a specified timeframe e.g. within the next three months.]*
- **Recommended:** *The programme/project should benefit from the uptake of this recommendation. [Note to review teams – if possible Recommended risk based*

recommendations should be linked to programme/project milestones e.g. before contract signature and/or a specified timeframe e.g. within the next three months.]

As a guide, it is suggested that between 6 to 8 risk-based recommendations are given in the assurance review report.

The Review Team should also consider what is being done well, as well as recommendations for improvements and include reference to this in the report summary.

Blockers to Delivery

In the assurance review report the Review Team is asked to record critical, high impact blockers that are outside the project/programme's control that will severely impact Time, Cost, Quality and Scope e.g., lack of clarity around cross-government policy decisions and objectives or a lack of meaningful collaboration with key stakeholders including other departments and Devolved Administrations. All review team members are expected to help formulate the recommendations.

For each Blocker, the Review Team should include reasoning as to why this cannot be resolved and provide a suggested escalation route. This should also include any critical path or key dates by which each Blocker **MUST** be resolved in order to manage or reduce impact.

Ref. #	**Blocker**	**Describe the specific nature of the blocker** ***(Include reasoning why this cannot be resolved and provide a suggested escalation route)***	**Consequence to the programme/project if not resolved** ***(Include any critical path or key dates by which the blocker MUST be resolved in order to manage or reduce impact)***
1.	Parliament	The project requires secondary legislation to be passed by Parliament, meaning that until the Statutory Instrument (SI) is laid and debated in Parliament the Project will not know whether the SI has been Made.	Critical path delay. Without the SI being made, the project is unable to move to the next delivery phase.

8. Confidentiality and Disclosure

The SRO will be responsible for ensuring that action is taken to address the agreed risk based recommendations. They are encouraged to share the assurance review report with those key stakeholders who may benefit from its findings. A copy of the report will always be sent to the IPA/DAC. IPA may distribute the report wider (e.g. to HMT and other areas of the Cabinet Office, such as Government Commercial Function and Government Digital Services) if appropriate. A copy of the report will also be passed to the Review Team responsible for the next review.

Any programme/project with a Red SGA will be reported to the AO, and HMT and CO Officials in order to proactively escalate and agree next steps. This will be done by the PDA.

All reviewers have an individual responsibility to ensure that all appropriately marked, sensitive or critical business information provided to them before and during the review, whether on paper or in electronic form, is secure at all times. The IPA requires the Review Team to dispose of the review documents no later than 5 working days after the delivery of the final assurance review report.

Please note that assurance reports are subject to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. In the unlikely event of the RTL or other parties being asked to respond to an FOI request, please contact the IPA as soon as possible before action is taken. Should a report be released under FOI, any names of the Review Team will be redacted.

9. Feedback on the Review Team

All members of the Review Team are required to complete a Review Feedback form:

- The **RTL** is required to complete a Feedback Form on each of the RTM;
- Each **RTM** is required to complete a Feedback Form on the RTL; and
- The **SRO** is requested to complete a feedback form on the performance of the review process and the Review Team. The SRO feedback is copied to the RTL and RTMs for information, the RTL will also be copied into the feedback by the RTMs.

This is a 360-degree feedback process which is part of the ongoing quality assurance and accreditation process. As this is an open process, the RTL should ensure that they send a copy of the completed form to each of the RTMs.

The Review Team is also encouraged to share their view of the RTM and RTL's performance with the individual concerned at the end of the review. The feedback form is not designed to be part of any internal appraisal process that exists in their organisation. Your comments are an important way of ensuring that reviewers can be developed, that assurance good practice is maintained, and that the IPA can learn from your experiences. Please also send a copy of the feedback to the Gare Review helpdesk (Gateway.Helpdesk@ipa.gov.uk) for retention on the individual's records.

10. Summary of key actions

The RTL will need to:

- Review relevant documents that the IPA or the programme/project provides prior to the planning meeting and review;
- Reacquaint themselves with the relevant guidance material e.g. relevant Gate Review Workbook;
- Contact the appropriate AL for an initial briefing on the background and scope of the review. This contact is then available throughout the course of the review;
- Contact the RTMs (at least 1 week before the planning meeting) to make introductions and discuss the context of the review and the logistics of the planning meeting (date, time location etc.);
- Inform the RTM's of any necessary programme/project or review details;
- Speak with the SRO and/or PPM to familiarise themselves with the programme/project and discuss the agenda for the planning meeting;
- Request any other information they require from the programme/project team before the planning meeting;
- Check the planning meeting location and facilities (e.g. flipchart, projector, laptop etc.);

- Check the review location(s) and the facilities available (e.g. meeting and interview rooms, e-mail, photocopier, refreshments etc.);
- Check whether security clearance or security passes need to be arranged in advance;
- Send the agreed planning meeting agenda to the SRO, PPM, RTMs and AL;
- Manage the planning meeting, assisted by the AL, if necessary;
- Lead the Review Team, carry out the review, ensuring time for information gathering, information sharing, emerging findings discussions, agreement of findings and recommendations and writing the review report;
- Present and discuss the review report with the SRO at the end of the review. (The AL should be informed if the SGA is Red);
- Send a copy of the final review report to the IPA RTR within 5 working days of completion of the assurance review;
- Return the completed RTM feedback forms to the Gate Review Helpdesk (Gateway.Helpdesk@ipa.gov.uk) and to the RTMs; and
- Discuss the implications of the SRO feedback and the review report with the AL.

The RTMs will need to:

- Review relevant documents that the IPA or the programme/project provide prior to the planning meeting and the review;
- Reacquaint themselves with the relevant guidance material e.g. Gate review Workbook;
- Discuss the context of the review and the logistics of the planning meeting when the RTL contacts them (at least 1 week before the planning meeting);
- Attend and participate in the planning meeting;
- Participate in the review process, obtaining evidence to support the conclusion and risk based recommendations of the review;
- Participate in the emerging findings discussions with the SRO at key points throughout the review;
- Assist in the writing of the assurance review report; and
- Return the RTL feedback form to the Gate Review Helpdesk (Gateway.Helpdesk@ipa.gov.uk) and to the RTL.

11. Where to find additional information

More information can be found in the following sources:

- Infrastructure and Projects Authority web pages.
- Assurance toolkit (includes guidance on the various types of assurance reviews and the Gate Workbooks which should be used to inform every review.
- Gate Review Helpdesk: Gateway.Helpdesk@ipa.gov.uk
- Embedded Documents: A reminder that all documents referenced in this briefing note are available here.

12. Acronyms

Acronyms used throughout this document include:

- **PPM:** Programme/Project Manager
- **RPA:** Risk Potential Assessment

- **IPA:** Infrastructure and Projects Authority
- **AL:** IPA Assurance Lead
- **RTR:** Review Team Resourcer
- **RTL:** Review Team Leader
- **RTM:** Review Team Member
- **SRO:** Senior Responsible Owner
- **PPM COE:** Programme & Project management Centre of Excellence
- **DAC:** Departmental Assurance Coordinator
- **PDA:** IPA Project Delivery Advisor
- **SGA:** Stage Gate Assessment
- **RAG:** Red, Amber, Green