



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs



Infrastructure  
and Projects  
Authority



# DEFRA PROJECT INITIATION: LESSONS LEARNED REPORT

An insight study into major project initiation in the public sector

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July 2023





# FOREWORD

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Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) plays a major role in people's day-to-day lives. We are here to make our land greener, our air purer, our water cleaner, and our food more sustainable. Our mission is to restore and enhance the environment for the next generation, leaving it in a better state than we found it.

Delivering on that agenda requires some big changes – to public attitudes and behaviour, to the way business operate, and to the way we use science and technology – and a diverse range of projects to manage that change and deliver those outcomes. But how can we make sure those projects are set up to succeed?

Building on findings from research into some of the Ministry of Defence's most complex programmes, we examine the characteristics that have delivered success for Defra's growing portfolio. Through in-depth interviews with Defra project leaders, we provide five key themes to secure success in initiation, backed up with data, and practical applications for leaders to apply across government.

We are committed to sharing the lessons from these programmes for the benefit of others and to improve project initiation throughout the public sector.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**Programmes are likely to be more successful, earlier, when people are placed at the centre of initiation.** During initiation, there is a desire to build momentum quickly, prioritise time to value, and demonstrate the delivery value early despite a lack of certainty. We know that if projects are not set up effectively, they are more likely to fail through inadequate support or increased costs. This reinforces the need for strong leadership and the creation of a culture where people will be inspired to deliver successfully. Placing people at the heart of successful foundations laid during the initiation phase can pay dividends.

Following our study into Project Initiation within the Ministry of Defence we wanted to take this exploration a step further, testing previous insights and developing a greater understanding of initiation challenges in the public sector while identifying applicable lessons to mitigate challenges. With each department we study, the greater our insight into the nuances of programme initiation across government.

This report summarises the findings from interviews conducted with Senior Responsible Owners and Project Directors from six Defra projects of varying project type, size, scale, complexity, and risk level. Within the report, a summary of findings from our Defra study will be provided and cross-departmental insights identified between the Ministry of Defence and Defra project initiation studies.

This report highlights five areas to focus on in order to successfully initiate projects in Defra:

- Empower leadership to manage workforce strategically
- Focus on the content rather than the template
- Create a safe environment to bridge the divide between ‘policy’ and ‘delivery’
- Accept and manage uncertainty
- Build and demonstrate confidence.

Each section of the report contains a key lesson with learning statements and suggestions for how these learning statements can be applied.

The Defra Project Delivery Function, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA), and PA Consulting have worked collaboratively to develop this report. We hope that the insights and lessons will prove useful to project professionals across Defra, and more widely across the public sector.

# WHY DEFRA FOR OUR NEXT INITIATION REPORT

Following our study into Project Initiation with the Ministry of Defence (MoD), we decided to study Defra due to the variety of programmes which offer valuable insights for the public sector and future cross-departmental collaboration.

With an ambition to develop optimal project delivery capability and deliver a varied profile of government investments,

an initiation study with Defra commenced. The varied profile indicated potential for wide applicability of findings by other public sector organisations. Within the varied profile, programme budgets ranged from £178 million to £23.8 billion, and comprised both Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP) and non-GMPP initiatives.

| Programmes studied                         | Whole-life cost | Risk potential assessment rating | Type of project              | Scale                    |
|--|-----------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Science Capability in Animal Health (SCAH) | £2.8bn          | (H)                              | Infrastructure               | GMPP (Tier A/Active)     |
| Farming and Countryside Programme (FCP)    | £23.8bn         | (H)                              | Agriculture Transformation   | GMPP (Tier A/Active)     |
| Defra Transformation                       | £3.3m           | (H)                              | Transformation               | -                        |
| Office for Environmental Protection        | £8m             | (M)                              | Statutory Body Establishment | -                        |
| Workplace Facilities Management            | £866m           | (M)                              | Transformation/Procurement   | GMPP (Tier B)            |
| Anonymous                                  | £178m           | (H)                              | Digital/Infrastructure       | GMPP (Tier A/Monitoring) |

Conclusion of studies with both Defra and the MoD provide strong foundations for future exploration to drive collective understanding of the key determinants to achieving successful programme initiation within the public sector.

# LESSONS

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## EMPOWER LEADERSHIP TO MANAGE WORKFORCE STRATEGICALLY

- a. Understand your required capabilities and recruit the right resources
- b. Create a purposeful and accessible leadership team which set the tone for the programme team



## FOCUS ON THE CONTENT RATHER THAN THE TEMPLATE

- a. Establish a Project Initiation Document as an engagement tool to ensure the programme purpose and scope are clearly understood
- b. Design and implement effective knowledge management processes



## CREATE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT TO BRIDGE THE DIVIDE BETWEEN 'POLICY' AND 'DELIVERY'

- a. Put psychological safety at the heart of the programme culture
- b. Ensure 'deliverers' are in the room before any policy is created
- c. Establish open and transparent information-sharing



## ACCEPT AND MANAGE UNCERTAINTY

- a. Front load resource to account for uncertainty
- b. Prioritise early stakeholder buy-in with consistent engagement efforts throughout
- c. Ensure political stakeholders place trust in programme teams



## BUILD AND DEMONSTRATE CONFIDENCE

- a. Create a compelling vision and clear articulation of the purpose of your programme
- b. Establish open governance forums which can hold programmes to account effectively

# SECTION 1: EMPOWER LEADERSHIP TO MANAGE WORKFORCE STRATEGICALLY

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## Introduction

Resourcing is a critical success factor for a programme at any stage, but during project initiation is even more challenging. Often there is a need to show progress before the capability gaps are understood. This can result from a lack of clarity over the planned programme outcomes and difficulty determining high priority resources.

Resourcing strategies have two focal points: addressing holistic resourcing requirement and ensuring effective, collegiate leadership is in place. Addressing resourcing requirements effectively can be achieved through adopting an adaptable approach and scheduling iterative reviews. When deploying resources, consideration should be given to placing resources within the right project/programme areas. Recruitment of collegiate leadership

teams position programmes for success by ensuring the leadership team sets the tone during initiation and navigates difficult decisions.

By adopting this two-fold strategy to resourcing, necessary expertise can be brought in to develop solutions and demonstrate credibility in constructing the right team, consequently building confidence in ability to deliver.

Resource pools are finite and resourcing processes often lack agility. This leads to tension at the start of the programme. Uncertainty adds to this tension, as a lack of clarity over programme outcomes make it difficult to determine skill sets at an early stage.





## SECTION 1A: Understand your required capabilities and recruit the right resources



### Learning statement 1:

#### Match subject matter experts (SMEs) including project professionals to projects by aligning capabilities and experience to the size, complexity, and risk of the programme

Recruitment of project professionals and SMEs and alignment of their capabilities to a project can bring multiple benefits. Even for complex projects, it is possible to determine the capabilities required using a real-time view of skills availability.

Programme Leaders that focus on gaining visibility of the total resource pool can improve

delivery confidence through enhanced project planning skills, and consequently enable better value as there is clear line of sight to the delivery cost upfront.

Project professionals and SMEs have an important role in defining what good looks like and providing lessons learned from previous experiences. This demonstrates the

additional value experts can bring through knowledge sharing.



*Learning by example is a really powerful thing, sometimes quite hard to do though, and so may require [...] a safe space.*

*Defra Senior Responsible Officer (SRO)*

### Learning statement 2:

#### Building a team with broad capability during the initiation supports momentum

The recruitment market is competitive, and candidate is king. Knowing which types of resource to prioritise can be challenging. As previously observed in MoD Project Initiation: Lessons Learned report, it is vital to recruit technical and specialist expertise. However, Programme Leaders also need to recruit a broad capability set across programmes to avoid time delays caused by emergency recruitment.

Ensure successful application of learning through a thorough assessment of required resource. As similarly observed by MoD Project Initiation: Lessons Learned report, this should include long-term resource planning throughout the project lifecycle. Our findings highlight the importance of adopting an adaptive approach to resource planning, scheduling iterative resource reviews as the programme progresses.



*You can never have too much capability and capacity of the right type – you always look back and wish you'd hired more X, Y, and Z, earlier. I think that's true of just about every programme I've ever worked on.*

*Defra Programme Director (PD)*



## Application

- Encourage a culture shift through ‘stop and think’ time at the start of a project or programme to assess required delivery capability. To achieve this, resourcing management should follow three stages:
  1. Allocation (identifying what resources are needed to complete the work)
  2. Aggregation (total amount of resources used on daily/weekly/monthly basis)
  3. Scheduling (calculation of resources required to deliver work). Increased time should be given to the allocation phase with a regular iterative review as resource requirements evolve beyond initiation.
- Implement operating model changes to place delivery professionals at the centre of delivering programmes. This can be successfully achieved through analysis of the ‘capability model’ within an operating model to provide a 360-degree review of current capabilities. A detailed diagnostic review should be undertaken utilising a capability map to demonstrate ‘as is’ capabilities and a subsequent review of capabilities (sourcing, people/skills, structure, processes, and governance) to pinpoint areas where delivery professionals and experts can bring most value.
- Take a more cohesive, strategic approach by creating a Project Delivery Framework. Mapping required talent is often overlooked but required to solve attrition and difficulties in recruitment (both noted problems by Defra programme leaders). The Project Delivery Framework will provide an outline of the required skills and training, and ensure resourcing is aligned to the framework. The UK Government Project Delivery Capability Framework can provide a valuable reference point for competencies required for project delivery professionals.

**Importance of having right skills and capability was mentioned by two thirds of workshop groups as critical to project initiation success.**

## SECTION 1B:

### Create a purposeful and accessible leadership team which sets the tone for the programme team



#### Learning statement 1:

#### Ensuring SROs and PDs have clear roles and responsibilities, and protected capacity enables leadership to work in a cohesive way faster

As noted by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) in 'Principles for Project Success', clearly defined roles and responsibilities within a programme is vital to delivery success.

We have observed that multiple poorly defined delivery management roles within senior leadership can have a detrimental impact on programme teams through escalation channels being unclear.



*It's made a huge difference to the ability of the programme to run because you have the capacity and capability driving the programme forward.*

Defra PD

Put in place a purposeful leadership team through clearly defining roles and responsibilities while ensuring SROs and PDs have protected capacity to be accessible to programmes. This will prove hugely beneficial, allowing the programme to progress at speed by removing duplicate roles and ensuring dedicated senior leaders keep the programme moving at pace.



*Decision-making was very rapid in a positive way – senior leaders recognised the diagnosis of the problem but also the opportunity in connection to the investment and responded to it very quickly and mobilised the organisation to recognise the structures required in an effective way.*

Defra PD

We have observed that a key requirement when defining senior leadership roles and responsibilities is documenting clear delegation and ensuring balanced capabilities between SROs/PDs. This will ensure gaps between SROs/PDs can be covered and that SROs/PDs have a sufficient grounding in delivery to provide strategic direction. Delegation offers a balance between delegated authority and accessibility to leadership which allows the programme team to feel empowered to deliver and drive progress. Bringing both these elements together will create an effective breakdown of roles and responsibilities.



### Application

- A Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed (RACI) matrix can provide clarity on respective responsibilities of leaders.
- Provide further detail of leadership responsibilities within delivery, through using a Responsibility Assignment Matrix (RAM) which combines both the Organisation Breakdown Structure (OBS) and Work Breakdown Structure (WBS).

Once a RAM is produced, a Cost Breakdown Structure (CBS) can be created. This will offer definition of leadership responsibilities which are specifically aligned to work packages and budgeting for projects/programmes.

- Extend Osmotherly letters to non-GMPP programme SROs and reinstate appointment letters for all PDs in the department.

**100 percent of workshop groups identified a strong leadership team as critical to success. Discussion around 'strong leadership' placed a focus on effective decision making, SRO/PD experience, and setting the strategic narrative.**

## SECTION 2: FOCUS ON THE CONTENT RATHER THAN THE TEMPLATE

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### Introduction

During the initiation phase, laying the foundations for delivery fundamentals is critical to avoid ambiguity and define success. It is vital to ensure agreement on scope and requirements to provide a baseline against which to measure programme delivery – if ill-defined, there are no success criteria against which to judge performance.

Thankfully, the materials to build the foundations exist. Defra has access to Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) resources to ensure programmes have access to the capability they need for success, and access to the measures against which they will be assessed. Defra is making use of this support to recognise and avoid IPA common causes of failure.

Ensure the content meets the standard of the template. To put in place required foundations, create and utilise a Project Initiation Document (PID) as a tool to establish a stable environment for delivery and minimise flux in budget, scope, and delivery timelines. A PID should be utilised as a tool to bring increased focus to the problem statements which need to be addressed and the solutions to be implemented.

Further, the PID should ensure the principles of information management are established and adhered to in order to facilitate rapid onboarding and a knowledge-sharing culture. The challenge is getting the right people, with the right knowledge, at the right time, despite busy schedules. In this, leaders have a vital role to play.





## Learning statement 1:

Establish a Project Initiation Document (PID) as an engagement tool to ensure the programme purpose and scope are clearly understood

The simplest, but most effective, engagement tool to ensure a common understanding among the team of the context, scope, expectations, and constraints of a project is to capture them within a Project Initiation Document (PID). Without it, despite motivation, the team's activity can easily stray beyond programme boundaries if they are stored in the heads of leaders alone.

It can be difficult for leaders and experts to make time to produce a PID in the face of competing demands, pressure for quick wins, and building their team, but the short-term loss of capacity is vastly outweighed by the benefits of a document that can be picked up by anyone, at any stage, with any level of expertise, to inform their work.

The PID also fights scope creep by acting as a mould into which the activity of the programme must roughly fit. If an initiative is proposed, a necessary check should be made against the suggested outcomes, audience, and purpose of the programme – should the three not meet, either the PID should be updated, or the initiative requires reworking to better align with the core goals of the programme.



*A short pithy [PID] outlining 'what is this thing' and 'who are you doing this for' in the hands of people who have the knowledge to answer the question allows those doing the delivery to pick it up easily.*

*Defra SRO*



## Application

- **A well-reviewed, pithy PID** covering the context, project parameters, the scope, audience, and risks, assumptions, issues, and dependencies (RAIDs), might take time to create, but delivers immeasurable benefits by ensuring the basics are understood by everyone stepping into the programme.
- **Provide dedicated time to produce a PID** at the outset of the programme collaboratively in a workshop setting. The buy-in rather than the length is the measure of success.



## Learning statement 2:

### Design and implement effective knowledge management processes

Even before initiation, the weight of information on complex programmes can feel overwhelming. It is therefore essential to get the basic information flows throughout a programme correct.

This takes the form of both SMEs being known and available to those who need them, and a clear approach to documentation. Often the latter can be deprioritised, leading to expertise living only in the mind and becoming inaccessible to programmes when staff depart or are absent, even for a short period of time.

Defra's complex environment means not everything can be captured, and there should not be a cottage industry on documenting every interaction. Finding the right balance means ensuring that information is documented and accessible when it is likely to lead to dependencies, while simultaneously using word of mouth to build a well-networked team able to directly seek answers to their toughest questions.



*On the initial period of the project it is key to understand the right people to talk to. There was a lack of information available on the programme e.g., lack of project or delivery portfolio outlining delivery and/or deliverables, lack of information on what was being worked on or being delivered, and a lack of 'lessons learned' resources for individuals coming into the programme. This caused some concern as there was not a clear, shared or joined-up view of delivery.*

*Defra PD*



### Application

- **Establish early on where and how information is stored** – and be willing to make changes as the programme grows to better suit the team.
- **Keep living 'who's who' guides from initiation onwards.** While storing all programme information might be an impossible task, a map of the people across the organisation can provide massive time savings to find the best-connected people for the question at hand.

**The majority of interviewees highlighted the importance of establishing clear scope and requirements. Specifically, an effective PID and information management processes were noted as critical.**

## SECTION 3: CREATE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT TO BRIDGE THE DIVIDE BETWEEN ‘POLICY’ AND ‘DELIVERY’

### Introduction

In the early stages of initiation, pressure from both external stakeholders and the internal programme team to see results quickly can create adverse incentives within teams. The public money which funds Defra’s programmes must be spent on valuable activity. If success cannot be seen quickly, the public spend can be difficult to justify. For example, by the end of the spending review period, R&D alone within Defra will have a budget of £236m – this rightly must be seen to deliver value. The urge is to ‘get something out of the door’, often taking the form of policy.

Policy alone can create challenges. While ‘deliverers’ and ‘policy-creators’ will start from the same set of programme-level ambitions and principles, the detail can lead them into very different positions. In nascent programmes, delivery can be seen as a future problem, and therefore collaboration with delivery professionals can be deprioritised, despite their expertise being necessary to turn policy into reality.

It is integral for early and consistent collaboration between policy and delivery teams to ensure programmes are deliverable, while achieving value for taxpayers. The answer is to establish an environment which bridges the divide between policy ‘creators’ and ‘deliverers’.



**More than half of our interviewees cited policy disconnected from delivery as a risk to programme delivery throughout their careers.**





## Learning statement 1:

### Put psychological safety at the heart of the programme culture

If the culture is not one of collaboration, then no amount of organisational restructuring will create coherent teams. The problem of siloed policy creation can often stem from feeling the pressure of having to progress, and the 'easy win' that publishing policy can represent. For teams where this pressure is particularly acute, the concern can manifest in not asking for feedback due to fear of being wrong or because deadlines mean that feedback, if collected, could not be meaningfully implemented.

To combat this, successes must be celebrated visibly and frequently in order to build a one-team mindset and show that there is value being collectively created. When there are concerns, leaders must create regular forums for raising them, as opposed to forcing people to raise their fears by exception.

As a report into psychological safety in MoD major projects establishes, government departments must be “committed to developing an environment of psychological safety in our major projects, so that we know early if a project is off track and so that every member of the team feels they can fully contribute.” The responsibilities of leaders include initiating engagements with the team, and generally increasing availability to all.



*Engagement with leadership [is] healthier now than previously due to more transparency, wider engagement, more channels for communication, and the emergence of special interest groups and focus on people.*

*Defra PD*

**Over 80 percent of leaders we interviewed cited psychological safety as a priority for their programme leadership.**



### Application

- **Celebrate successes with teams visibly and frequently to build a one-team mindset.** Whether through informal socials, shout-outs, or internal, informal show and tells, the ability to share and informally reward good work provides momentum to new teams.
- **Provide regular forums for raising concerns, issues, or risks, rather than by exception.** The easier and more comfortable it is to raise problems, the greater the likelihood of their being solved.
- **Build line management into organisational structure to ensure concerns raised within development conversations are escalated effectively.** More than performance, line management should play a pastoral role in supporting people to find the right role across Defra for them.



## Learning statement 2:

### Ensure ‘deliverers’ are in the room before any policy is created

Delivery teams often complain of policy being drafted and ‘thrown over the fence’ to them to carry out. This creates distrust between teams and suspicion of their motives – policy-creators grow exasperated as to why deliverers refuse to understand their work, and deliverers are nervous to carry out policy they do not fully understand. Within Defra, this was a more noticeably prominent challenge to address when compared to our exploration into project initiation with the MoD.

The solution is to remove the fence – force delivery and policy representation at every stage of drafting to share insights on practice and feasibility. Even if the programme is still distant from breaking ground (or equivalent), it forces a shared vision from day one. Naturally there will be conflict, but facing this from the first meeting of a programme, rather than years in the future, protects programmes from risk of reset or even failure. Successful collaboration requires commitment from leaders to set good habits – freeing up their people’s time as necessary, and enshrining cooperation as a programme principle.



*The deliverers of policy, the project team, and the engineering and design team were all part of the programme structure rather than a case of a project running in policy that will then hand something over to ops... The concept of user need is built into the programme design.*

*Defra PD*



## Application

- **A project life cycle that enforces a cadence of policy and delivery working together**, supported with senior leadership buy-in and attendance.
- **In-person sessions at initiation** with attendance from professionals on all sides of the organisation build personal relationships which can be called upon, ad-hoc, throughout the programme.

**In workshops held with a cross-section of Defra stakeholders, ‘delivery professionals and SME involvement early in initiation’ was agreed to be one of the most beneficial themes in standing up successful programmes.**



### Learning statement 3:

#### Establish open and transparent information-sharing

A blocker to fostering a one-team mindset is misunderstanding between the different groups cooperating together, often for the first time. Defra is a complex environment in which it can be difficult for individuals to adequately exercise their curiosity. But there is a wealth of expertise in the department that can be leveraged for positive results. For one, many programmes will interact with the same arms-length government bodies and could share lessons as to how to manage stakeholders with a number of priorities to achieve outcomes.

Colleagues must be given the time and facilities to share information openly. When this exists, new informal teams self-form for the benefit of the programme. Communities of interest built by experts in policy creation allow traditional deliverers to expand their skillset and trust in the expertise of their organisation. Distinctly, deliverers can give policy writers an insight into their priorities, serving to break down misunderstanding.

Motivated people who are passionate about their professions are keen to share insights and understand rather than talk past one another. In applying some of the suggested actions, seniors can provide adequate headspace and time to benefit their programmes and Defra as a whole.



*When the programme was initiated, those different perspectives were not considered. It was set up as a policy initiative. It was completely disconnected from operations – a complete divorce between what currently happens and what we want to happen.*

*Defra PD*



#### Application

- **Establish and enable self-forming communities of interest and practice early** and rotate attendance by seniors across programmes to keep momentum.
- **Provide online space for transparent information-sharing wherever possible** – permitting relatively easy access to collaborative online spaces for anyone on the programme, rather than getting tied up in bureaucracy, allows for spontaneous information-sharing.

## SECTION 4: ACCEPT AND MANAGE UNCERTAINTY

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### Introduction

Due to large spending profiles and needing to demonstrate value for money, government programmes are subject to intense scrutiny. This includes close attention from the external political environment. Due to being accountable to the wider political environment, involvement of political stakeholders can add pressure to deliver from the initial stages. To navigate pressure, we recommend the creation of a stable environment through pricing for uncertainty and prioritising early stakeholder buy-in.





## Learning statement 1:

### Front load resource to account for uncertainty

During the initiation phase, it is often difficult to estimate resource requirements for the duration of a programme. Fluctuating project requirements make it difficult to determine required resource, leading to uncertainty.

Insights provided by Defra programme leaders highlight how 'pricing in for uncertainty' can resolve this challenge. Specifically, through cautious estimation of resources required and scheduling iterative requirement reviews, programmes can ensure resource estimates remain accurate. During estimation, build flexibility into resource profile. The benefit of front loading resources was evidenced by Defra programme leaders highlighting the challenge of underestimation of resources and a desire for more capability at a later stage. Front loading increases the ability to manage resourcing demand fluctuations, for example as a result of team turnover, while building confidence in resource estimates.

Demonstrating an acceptance of the uncertainty that will arise during initiation is crucial. Effective forward planning can minimise reputational risk caused by unforeseen costs and delays.



*The larger a project is, the more resource needs to be front loaded, and uncertainty priced in, with sponsors made aware of uncertainty.*

*Defra PD*

**40 percent of interviewees directly referenced the presence of uncertainty during initiation and the challenges this can bring to progress.**



### Application

- **Embedding an achievable risk appetite is critical to manage future uncertainty.** As highlighted by a Defra programme leader, the government Construction Playbook can be used as a guide to deliver pragmatically, reduce risk, and accelerate delivery once a programme is suitably positioned. Specifically, this should be a joint approach of implementing risk identification, treatment, monitoring, and report combined with assessment of risk through the lenses of market health and capability, developing clear specification, delivery model approach, and contract design and delivery.



## Learning statement 2:

### Prioritise early stakeholder buy-in with consistent engagement efforts throughout

Achieving stakeholder buy-in can optimise programme delivery outcomes, support programme objectives, and provide a sense of resilience when delivery challenges are faced.

Stakeholder buy-in can be difficult to achieve during the initiation phase due to engagement efforts not being prioritised and the need to mobilise a programme quickly. Additionally, stakeholders are individually motivated by different factors and dedicated resource is required due to complex and contrasting expectations. Consequently, this can result in sporadic approaches to managing stakeholders.

To achieve stakeholder buy-in, programme leaders must provide stability through understanding and careful management. Critically, programme leaders must communicate a compelling vision to stakeholders to increase confidence and ensure alignment between programme teams.



*We knew we were going to have delivery challenges and cost challenges, so a really structured approach and getting the stakeholders bought into that was critical.*

*Defra PD*

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## Application

- **Prioritise early stakeholder buy-in with consistent engagement efforts throughout.** To consistently engage, firstly identify key stakeholders, both internal and external, undertake analysis of different groups and influence spheres, and develop an action plan to define how each stakeholder will be managed through the lifecycle of the project.
- **Plan the knock-on impact of not prioritising engagement.** Engagement is often one of the first things to be cut out of a budget as it can be seen as a nice to have rather than a need to have. Prevent this by citing examples and including metrics from previous lessons learned.
- **Undertaking stakeholder engagement** will require dedicated resource and project managers must understand the importance of managing stakeholders within their delivery and resource plans to ensure this is widely understood. Multiple benefits emphasised by project managers include more effective risk management, improved communications planning, and ensuring a productive programme environment is created.



### Learning statement 3:

#### Ensure political stakeholders place trust in programme teams

Political stakeholders are vital in determining successful delivery of government programmes. Political stakeholders often face pressure from the wider environment. Ambitions of political parties and individuals can create inherent tensions between quality and speed for delivery. This can make success during the programme/project initiation increasingly difficult.

Across multiple Defra programmes, it has been noted that positive relationships can be developed through political stakeholders placing trust in programme teams. Trust can empower programme teams to focus on delivery of outcomes without needing to pivot attention to over-managing political stakeholders. As a Defra SRO noted, the support of a political minister allowed the programme leader to “accomplish her goals as opposed to over-managing or pressurising.”



#### Application

- **Development of an effective communication strategy to achieve alignment and subsequent buy-in with political stakeholders on objectives.** An effective communications plan will use different messaging mediums to account for audience and include methods to receive feedback to adjust the plan to maximize impact. Using effective communications can ensure objectives, requirements, and plans are understood, and stakeholders are aligned and motivated. Utilising a communication strategy demonstrating progress early, even in small ways, can provide political stakeholders with assurance and build trust in the team.



## SECTION 5: BUILD AND DEMONSTRATE CONFIDENCE

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### Introduction

Programme initiation is a time of significant uncertainty. Very little is confirmed, and scope, schedule, cost, and benefits can change from one stakeholder engagement to the next. Programmes have many stakeholders who want something different from a programme. They can even think that the programme is wrong for the organisation and believe that the organisation should be prioritising something else.

All of this uncertainty and change makes it very difficult to build confidence and trust in the programme. This lack of confidence can result in delays and extra costs or cuts to resource if the organisation has greater confidence in another programme and prioritises it instead.

Confidence and trust from stakeholders is critical, but hard to build and very easily lost. We have found that Programme Leaders need to prioritise external stakeholders and describe the programme in their language, not that of the programme team.





### Learning statement 1:

#### Create a compelling vision and clear articulation of the purpose of your programme

Vision statements are often treated like a tick box exercise and lead to dry, unconvincing statements. This results in organisations losing interest, impacting confidence and trust.

Our findings identify that successful programmes know their critical stakeholders, consult with them, and collaboratively build the vision tailored to their desires. This creates confidence, trust, and increases the perception of programme performance. Engaging collaboratively also has the benefit of allowing Programme Leaders to navigate different stakeholder priorities.

Everyone on a programme should be able to articulate why what they do matters. From those responsible for strategic guidance to the newest and most junior colleagues, it is the responsibility of leaders to ensure that all are able to understand why public money has been spent on the programme or project, and what it hopes to achieve. At no point is this more important than during initiation.



#### Application

- **Spending time on a compelling vision statement** creates unity and makes challenges from stakeholders regarding certainty easier to manage. A team creates confidence if they are pulling in the same direction, even if the nature of the direction is yet to be defined.



## Learning statement 2:

### Establish open and honest governance forums which can hold programmes to account effectively

Effective governance is critical to the success of any programme. However, there is often a sense that governance is not effective during initiation when there is significant uncertainty and change.

Identifying the people needed for the programme to be successful can be challenging. Roles and responsibilities will be unclear and changing which makes decision making tougher. Uncertainty and change impacts how people behave, increases the perception of risk, and results in people being afraid to table issues and risks.

Our findings show that Programme Leaders who changed their mindset from eliminating risk to controlling risk created a space where the team could talk openly about risks and issues. The open conversations resulted in greater confidence and trust because stakeholders could see that risks and issues were not being hidden and were being addressed.



*The trick is not to remove all the risk, but to get the basic control structures in and a plan in place, and get stakeholders clear on the strategy to answer the core questions faced by the programme.*

*Defra PD*

Good governance builds stakeholder confidence. It is essential that individuals feel safe in the knowledge of what is within their gift, what should be reported upwards, and clarity of route to do so.

Governance also allows programmes to best manage changes when they inevitably occur, because stakeholders are already aware, at the necessary level, of what is happening in a programme, and decision-makers understand what they can and cannot do. Rather than embedding fear of authority, governance should empower individuals to understand their sphere of influence and deliver benefits within it.



### Application

- **The purpose of governance is to provide clarity about who has the authority to make decisions,** providing visibility (without needless interference) to the wider ecosystem, and control the outputs and benefits. Simple terms of reference, clear hierarchies, and clarifying lines of reporting, even if they are subject to later change, are integral for initiation.

Every workshop cited the power of governance and assurance in fostering openness and getting partners on board.



# CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL INSIGHT

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By comparing lessons from the Defra Project Initiation Report with the previous Ministry of Defence report, we noted three similarities within the lessons identified. This offers valuable cross-government insight into the critical success factors for programme initiation. The three Defra lessons identified with similarities to the MoD report are:

1. Build and demonstrate confidence
2. Empower leadership to manage workforce strategically
3. Accept and manage uncertainty.

Noted the need for communicating a clear and coherent vision. Consistency of this lesson across both the Defra and MoD reports is expected due to the support of a broad stakeholder landscape being central to programme delivery success. Consequently, leaders must embody a project's ambition from the outset and consistently champion the vision as the programme progresses.

Leadership was a significant theme in both reports with a focus on establishing clear responsibilities for leadership teams. This finding supports application to the wider public sector due to the alignment with previous literature. Within the Association for Project Management (APM) *Conditions for project success* (2015), 88 percent of respondents noted effective governance (defined as clearly identified leadership; responsibilities; reporting lines) as important. This highlights that across different public sector environments, clarity in leadership roles is a necessary precursor to setting strategic direction and effective decision-making.

Effectively managing resourcing throughout the project lifecycle was highlighted within both reports with both observing the requirement to carefully estimate resources and develop long-term resourcing strategies. Within public sector environments, achieving broad capability and sufficient resources will ensure programmes are equipped to deliver effective outcomes. As noted in the APM's *The Dynamic Conditions for Project Success*, diversity in skillsets when resourcing is essential to creating a high performance environment because differences in perspectives produce better outcomes.

## CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL INSIGHT *CONTINUED*

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Across both reports, the similarities in lessons are tied together through a prioritisation of people as critical to initiation. This reflects previous findings from the IPA's *Principles for Project Success* report which emphasise the need to prioritise people and behaviour through building a team with diverse skills and experience, setting clear individual responsibilities, and improving organisational capabilities as required.

Despite the similarities noted above, differences were identified between the two departments. Within the MoD, grappling with investment decisions was a high priority, possibly due to the greater average budget and commercial complexity in defence programmes.

Conversely, Defra leaders recognised synergies between policy and delivery teams as a priority – perhaps due to their greater departmental focus as a regulator in light of Brexit.

With each study undertaken, we will build our understanding of the similarities and differences between initiation lessons across government departments.

These learnings will drive continuous improvement within programme delivery. Critically, learning from experience will ensure government departments effectively mitigate risk and achieve value in future projects and programmes.

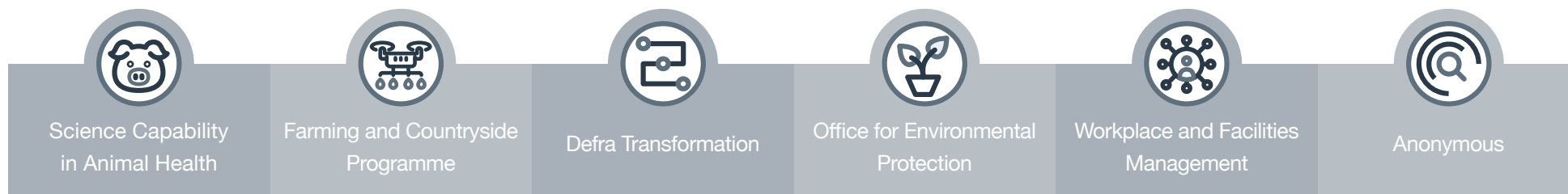


# METHODOLOGY

## We followed tried and tested methodology:

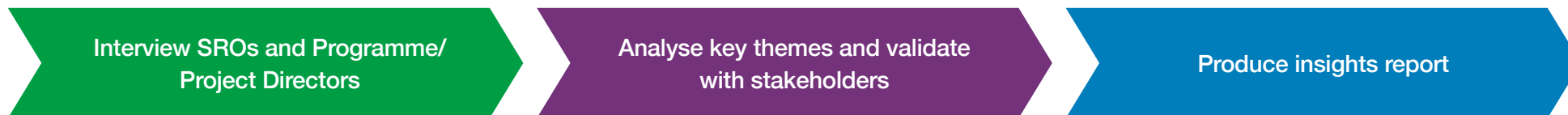
We studied GMPP and non-GMPP projects of varying type, length, and complexity to get the broadest view of the Defra project initiation landscape

We took a similar approach to the MoD Defence report which is outlined below:



The programmes selected cut across all areas within Defra with multiple programme types including infrastructure, transformation, statutory body establishment, digital, and procurement. Within the programmes selected, four were GMPP programmes through SCAH, FCP, Anonymous (Tier A), and Workplace Facilities Management (Tier B). We specifically studied a mix of GMPP and non-GMPP to understand whether there were any significant differences between the lessons that could be learned for initiation between these two categories of programmes.

Each programme has unique challenges with different lifecycle length and budgets ranging from several million pounds to multi-billion pounds. Despite the differences, lessons were consistent throughout the programmes, however, a greater volume of lesson examples were identified from GMPP programmes. Together these programmes represent a sub-set of the Defra portfolio, with a range of initiation learning that proves relevant to projects and programmes across the wider public sector.



Insights were gathered from six programmes through a semi-structured interview approach with Senior Responsible Owners and Project Directors across Defra. Once the interviews and subsequent write-ups were completed and approved by the interview subjects, the Defra and PA team mapped out several key insights.

At a series of workshops, these insights were evaluated, lessons identified, and learning statements developed for analysis with senior stakeholders. The validated lessons were then shortlisted to form the basis of this report with associated learning statements and practical applications identified.

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