



Starting Gate:
MPA Guidance for Departments

Version 1.0 – September 2011

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Executive Summary

In January 2011 the Prime Minister wrote to members of the Cabinet confirming the mandate for the new Major Projects Authority (MPA) in the Cabinet Office, including the requirement for government departments to engage an MPA *Starting Gate* review for **all** emerging major initiatives well **before** project delivery gets underway, i.e. normally at or before development of the Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC). This document provides guidance for the Senior Policy Owners (SPOs) who commission and sponsor *Starting Gate* reviews, and their policy development teams.

The purpose of a *Starting Gate* review is to help the department identify practical delivery issues early in the policy-to-delivery lifecycle, and so help major projects succeed from the outset. The *Starting Gate* report is also one of the key documents that HM Treasury spending teams use to decide the level of approval scrutiny the future project will require, and they will not normally approve major projects if the required assurance processes, like *Starting Gate*, are not done.

A *Starting Gate* review normally takes place over three days in the department's offices, including non-attributable interviews with the key stakeholders, drafting of the report, and regular progress updates with the senior sponsor. The review is preceded by an Assessment Meeting (usually six to eight weeks beforehand) to initially agree the review scope and assurance requirements, and a later Planning Meeting to finalise the arrangements.

The review team will consist of two or three individuals selected by the MPA from its pool of reviewers, based on their mix of skills and experience. The end product is a *Starting Gate* report that will be issued by the Review Team Leader to their clients within a week of completing the review; the departmental client is normally the SPO, whilst the MPA client is the Project Specialist who leads on all MPA liaison with, and support to, the department in relation to its major projects.

Five high level issues are explored as standard in every *Starting Gate*:

1. Business case basics
 - a. Aims and objectives
 - b. Options – is there a proposed option and will it achieve the aim/s?
 - c. What are the fallbacks/other options?
 - d. What must be taken into account and/or cannot be ignored?
2. Timeline
3. Team capability
4. Finances – estimated cost and available budget
5. Risks.

The nature and focus of additional exploration will vary, as each *Starting Gate* is tailored to the initiative concerned.

It is essential that the senior sponsor in the department attends the Planning Meeting, agrees a code of conduct with the review team, and signs off the scope for the review **before** it starts – this helps avoid potential misunderstandings, ensures that the review explorations are appropriately focussed on key areas, and that the report provides the required assurance and useful recommendations. Any later changes in scope agreed during the review will also be documented for the same reasons.

The review team will act as 'critical friends' throughout and, although this may involve them giving the senior sponsor some difficult messages, the senior sponsor should be satisfied that the review team is there to help the initiative to succeed.

When arranging, managing and completing a *Starting Gate* review, the responsibilities that fall to the commissioning department include:

1. The well-considered completion of the Risk Potential Assessment form that is submitted to the MPA to commission the review.
2. The senior sponsor's agreement in writing of the scope of the *Starting Gate* review, before it starts.
3. Arrangement of all logistics for the review, including rooms, interviewees, refreshments, equipment and IT if required, security passes and escorting for the review team, and provision of pre-reading and reference documentation.
4. Payment of any consultant fees incurred, at a standard daily rate, in the exceptional circumstances that the review team cannot be fully resourced in the timescales from the civil servant reviewer pool.
5. Confirmation of a required security marking for the final report.
6. Circulation of the final report to all relevant stakeholders within the department, so that it is acted upon.
7. Completion and return of review feedback forms while the experience is still fresh.
8. Responding (with advice from the MPA) to any Freedom of Information or transparency requirements, including prior redactions.

The MPA may draw on information in the final report to fulfil the Cabinet Office's own responsibilities in relation to the Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP). This involves sharing the report with others in the Cabinet Office and with HM Treasury, including spending teams and possibly ministers, as appropriate.

The MPA is constantly recruiting talented and experienced civil servants into the reviewer pool to meet the growing demand for *Starting Gate* and other assurance reviews for projects in the GMPP. If having been the client during a *Starting Gate* review process you are interested in becoming a review team member or leader for future reviews in other departments, please contact the MPA for more information via: gateway.helpdesk@cabinet-office.gsi.gov.uk.

Introduction

This document

This is a guide to the Major Projects Authority (MPA) mandated **Starting Gate** assurance tool. It will be of greatest relevance to Senior Policy Owners (SPO), policy development teams, and to those with responsibility for developing business change initiatives in central government. This document replaces all previous *Starting Gate* guidance for departments¹.

The Major Projects Authority

In January 2011 the Prime Minister wrote to members of the Cabinet confirming the mandate for the new Major Projects Authority in the Cabinet Office, and the requirement for government departments to engage a *Starting Gate* review **before** project delivery gets underway.

The MPA represents a sea change in the oversight of central government's major projects², at both an individual and a portfolio level. It aims to address the findings from the NAO report *Assurance of High Risk Projects (June 2010)* and from the Major Projects Review undertaken during summer 2010. The MPA is a new collaboration between the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury with the fundamental aim of significantly improving the delivery success rate of major projects across central government.

A '**major project**' is defined as any central government funded project or programme that requires HM Treasury approval during its life, as set out in Delegated Authority letters, and/or is of special interest to the Government. From April 2011 all major projects are included in the Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP).

More information on the MPA and on the integrated assurance and approvals regime for major projects from April 2011 is available through our website:

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/content/major-projects-authority>

¹ The word 'department' is used throughout this document to represent any central government body that may commission a *Starting Gate* review, including government departments, agencies and NDPBs.

² The word 'project' is used throughout this document to represent both projects and programmes.

Why?

A project is the vehicle by which a government policy or a business change is delivered. One of the best ways to ensure that a project succeeds is to make sure that it is viable in the first place. There is much evidence that high risk projects can fail in both public and private sectors; in central government this is most likely to be because the process of establishing a vehicle to deliver the policy (be it a portfolio, programme or project) is incomplete or flawed. Common failings include:

- Unrealistically tight timescales and/or immovable delivery deadline/s
- Absence of, or limited, options analysis before solutions are decided upon
- Lack of a business case to establish absolute goals
- Scope not finalised before the project starts
- No agreed budget or contingency planning
- Delivery resources (which may include suppliers) lack capability and/or capacity
- Lack of robust implementation plan and/or of strategic risk management plan.

The Prime Minister has therefore mandated the engagement by departments of a *Starting Gate* review for every major new initiative, which is to take place well before any delivery project gets properly underway. Its purpose is to help departments identify practical delivery issues much earlier in the policy-to-delivery lifecycle and so help major projects succeed from the outset.

Starting Gate sits alongside the Treasury's process for assessing affordability. The *Starting Gate* report is one of the key documents that HM Treasury spending teams will use to decide the level of approval scrutiny the project will require, and they will not normally approve major projects if the appropriate assurance processes, such as a *Starting Gate*, have not been followed. See the joint HM Treasury and Cabinet Office *Major Project Approval and Assurance Guidance (April 2011)* for more detail.

When?

A *Starting Gate* review should be engaged at the earliest point in development of a policy or business change, when enough work has been done to provide a meaningful basis for assessment but before the project is underway. In *Green Book* terms, this will be at or before development of the Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC). *Starting Gate* (like an OGC Gateway™ Zero), is repeatable.

Lead times to set up a *Starting Gate* review have to accommodate the availability of departmental participants and of review team members, and therefore vary. However, the MPA aims to have *Starting Gate* reviews start six to eight weeks after an initial Assessment Meeting carried out by the MPA with the department (see How? section for more details).

Who?

In your organisation

For a review to be organised by the MPA it must be formally commissioned by the department, i.e. usually by the **Senior Policy Owner (SPO)** at SCS level (who may or may not have the designation of Senior Responsible Owner or SRO at this stage). This person becomes the 'senior sponsor' for the review. He or she **must** sign off the scope of the *Starting Gate* review in writing before reviewers are engaged; and will be required to attend the detailed planning meeting, and to be available throughout the review, particularly for the final feedback session. See How? section for more detail on each step of the process.

Most departments have a **Portfolio Management Office (PMO), Programme and Project Management Support Unit (PPMSU), Programme and Project Management Centre of Excellence (COE)**, or equivalent. Members of this corporate team will have had previous experience of working with the MPA on integrated assurance for major projects, including *Starting Gate*, and will be able to advise you on general requirements and on any departmental expectations of senior sponsors. A representative of this team should be involved before, during and after every *Starting Gate* review, as they are key stakeholders with a wider interest in the development and visibility of your organisation's overall delivery portfolio.

Your organisation is likely also to have a **Departmental Assurance Coordinator (DAC)**, Departmental Gateway Coordinator (DGC) or equivalent, usually located in one of the above corporate teams, who may be able to support and/or advise the policy development team on the logistics and paperwork involved when arranging a *Starting Gate* review.

In the Major Projects Authority

The **Project Specialist (PS)** who manages MPA liaison with your department is your first point of contact in the MPA. Your local PMO or DAC can put you in touch with them.

The MPA Project Specialist liaises with your organisation's DAC (or equivalent) and the policy development team to schedule the *Starting Gate* review and any future MPA assurance, should the policy develop into a major project. The Project Specialist would then work with an MPA **Resource Leader (RL)** to resource each review with appropriate reviewers.

In the Review Team

The MPA will provide a team of two or three senior reviewers accredited for their skills and experience of tackling complex policy-to-delivery issues. Normally reviewers will be members of the MPA's civil servant reviewer pool. In exceptional circumstances, when this pool cannot provide a full team with the experience and availability to deliver a particular *Starting Gate* review, a consultant may be provided, at a standard daily rate that is invoiced to the department by the MPA.

Each *Starting Gate* review team is led, as a first among equals, by an experienced **Review Team Leader (RTL)**. This person is responsible for managing the review team to deliver an effective review process, through the planning stages and the review itself, to provision of the final report to the senior sponsor, and feedback to the MPA.

What?

The review team will conduct a series of interviews with key stakeholders over a few days – normally over three days but this may extend up to five days if the agreed scope is exceptionally broad and complex.

Five high level issues are explored as standard in every *Starting Gate*:

1. Business case basics:
 - a. Aims and objectives
 - b. Options - is there a proposed option and will it achieve the aim/s?
 - c. What are the fallbacks/other options?
 - d. What must be taken into account and/or cannot be ignored?
2. Timeline
3. Team capability
4. Finances - estimated cost and available budget
5. Risks.

The nature and focus of more detailed exploration will vary as each *Starting Gate* is tailored for the individual initiative concerned, but may include some of the following, as relevant:

1. The policy development process used
2. Implications of/alignment with relevant national strategies or policies (if any)
3. Procurement assumptions and strategies (if any)
4. Stakeholder engagement (actual and/or planned)
5. Constraints and dependencies
6. Preparation for transition to delivery (actual and/or planned).

At the end of the *Starting Gate* review, verbal feedback to the senior sponsor is supplemented by a short written report which highlights major findings and any suggested actions or recommendations for the department to take.

A *Starting Gate* review is repeatable, e.g. either at different stages of the policy development process, or applied to different aspects of the same policy.

How?

A *Starting Gate* review includes seven steps:

1. Commissioning
2. Assessment
3. Planning
4. Reviewing
5. Reporting
6. Feedback
7. Follow up.

Commissioning

Starting Gate reviews are commissioned by submitting a completed **Risk Potential Assessment (RPA)** form to the MPA – this form is available from the MPA's Assurance Toolkit webpage. The RPA requires the Senior Policy Owner to consider the consequential impact should the initiative fail to deliver its objectives to time, cost and/or quality. This assessment covers five key areas of potential impact:

1. Political
2. Public
3. Financial
4. Operational business and commercial change
5. Dependencies.

If the SPO's overall assessment is that the impact is medium, high, or very high, the RPA should be sent to the local DAC, who will forward it to the MPA and to the organisation's PMO (or equivalent).

Assessment

The MPA Project Specialist will subsequently arrange an **Assessment Meeting** with the review's senior sponsor (usually the SPO) in the client department, to discuss the scope of the review and its likely timing. The principal purposes of this meeting are to:

1. Identify the key characteristics of the initiative, including the stage it has reached, the nature and scale of the risks involved, and any particular handling sensitivities
2. Identify the parameters of the review
3. Clarify, if necessary, who is the client for the review and the primary recipient of the report
4. Establish the outline timetable for the review and any key dependencies.

Preferred dates for the more detailed Planning Meeting for the review are confirmed at the Assessment Meeting.

All this information will enable the MPA to start sourcing reviewers from its accredited reviewer pool.

Planning

The senior sponsor will, with support from their local DAC and in discussion with the MPA, start identifying suitable interviewees, arranging the timetable and logistics, and will provide appropriate pre-reading for the review team, e.g. relevant paperwork or web-links.

The purpose of the **Planning Meeting** is then for the review team to meet the senior sponsor, to discuss the initiative in more detail, to agree the number and role of interviewees, and to settle the logistics of the review which will fall to the department to organise (engaging interviewees, timetabling, security passes, ICT equipment, etc).

The RTL will chair this meeting and will liaise thereafter with the department on the detail. Normally the review team will want some time together before meeting the senior sponsor and his/her colleagues. The formal meeting with the departmental clients need take no more than two hours; it should include at least an hour with the senior sponsor, including agreement of the scope and a code of conduct for the review.

It is important that the scope of the review is defined clearly, is achievable within the review period, and is agreed by the senior sponsor in writing. This will enable the review team to deliver a report that addresses the key issues and risks, and provides appropriate assurance and recommendations on the way forward.

Establishing a code of conduct - a statement of professional principles applicable to everyone involved in the review - at the outset is essential to ensure that the review team and the departmental clients adopt uniform working practices and standards. This in turn will clarify mutual expectations in advance and will help to prevent any cultural differences from affecting the quality and effectiveness of the review. Some typical items for a *Starting Gate* Code of Conduct include:

1. Challenging but constructive style from the review team (critical friend approach)
2. Robust management of time
3. Understanding that a *Starting Gate* is a snapshot in time rather than an audit
4. No surprises at the end – regular feedback to the senior sponsor throughout.

It is the responsibility of the commissioning department to arrange for security passes and escorting for the review team for the Planning Meeting and throughout the review process, and to arrange for provision of IT equipment required by the review team for drafting and presenting the *Starting Gate* report.

Reviewing

Starting Gate interviews are all carried out on a non-attributable basis to encourage candour. The RTL, supported by the senior sponsor, should ensure all interviewees are informed of this at the outset to encourage full and frank discussion during the review.

The senior sponsor should be satisfied that the review team is there to help the initiative to succeed. However, in order to deliver an effective and high quality *Starting Gate* the review team may need to give the senior sponsor some difficult and/or unwelcome messages and to ensure that these are fully understood. The interview schedule should therefore be arranged so that the review team can provide regular feedback to the senior sponsor during the course of the review.

On occasion, the scope of a *Starting Gate* may change during the course of the review and/or as feedback is provided to the senior sponsor each day. If significant issues outside of the original scope arise during the course of the review, the RTL will agree with the senior sponsor whether or not to cover these in the final report. The RTL is required by the MPA to record in writing any agreed change in scope, and to notify the MPA Project Specialist of it.

The senior sponsor should be available for feedback during the course of the review and on the final day. By agreement, other members of the senior sponsor's team or organisation, e.g. the proposed SRO for the future delivery project, may also be present at the final feedback session.

Reporting

The client department must advise the review team of the appropriate protective marking of the *Starting Gate* report, as well as highlighting the implications of security markings on any documentation provided to the review team.

The RTL is responsible for completing the final report to the agreed scope and time, which is normally within a week of the review being completed. Any draft reports and the final report will be sent by the RTL to the senior sponsor and to the MPA.

As well as covering the agreed *Starting Gate* scope, the report will include the review team's recommendation on the next type of assurance review and its timing. This will help inform development of an Integrated Assurance and Approvals Plan (IAAP) for the subsequent delivery project, which is a mandatory requirement for all major projects in central government. Guidance on developing assurance strategies and IAAPs is available on the MPA's Assurance Toolkit webpage.

Feedback

The MPA seeks feedback from the senior sponsor after every *Starting Gate*, using a short form that explores how beneficial the review was and the performance of the review team. Honest feedback from review sponsors is very valuable in helping the MPA maintain the quality of its assurance reviews, and for training, supporting and managing the reviewer pool. These forms are confidential and are neither circulated nor published by the MPA. If you are the senior sponsor for a *Starting Gate*, please complete and return the form immediately, while the review experience is still fresh.

The review team members will also complete feedback forms on each other's performance and contribution during the review.

Follow-up

The MPA Project Specialist will follow up the review with the department, and will be responsible for organising any further *Starting Gates* for the initiative and/or for managing future MPA assurance provision, as and when a major project emerges to deliver the policy or business change.

In some instances the senior sponsor may seek a return visit from the RTL; for example to present the findings to a departmental main board or programme board. The RTL has discretion to do this so long as the additional requirement and, where applicable, payment for any additional consultancy time, is agreed by the MPA before any firm commitment is made.

Disclosure and confidentiality

The clients for, and owners of, a *Starting Gate* report are both the senior official who has commissioned the review (and therefore his or her department), and the MPA. The senior sponsor is expected to share the report more widely within his or her organisation and, where appropriate, with other stakeholders essential to development and delivery of the initiative. This reinforces the senior sponsor's ability to ensure the findings are well understood and the recommendations are followed up effectively.

In order to preserve version control and ensure the protection of confidential papers all reviewers will dispose of copies of the report and earlier drafts in any format e.g. electronic or paper, together with any notes and supporting documents, no later than seven days after delivery of the final report.

The MPA will retain a copy of the *Starting Gate* report for its own records. The MPA may draw on information in the report to fulfil the Cabinet Office's own responsibilities in relation to the Government's major projects and will routinely share the report with others in the Cabinet Office and with HM Treasury, including spending teams, and possibly ministers.

Information about or for a *Starting Gate* review, or in a *Starting Gate* report, will be subject to the FOI Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations (EIRs) 2004. Senior sponsors are responsible for compliance with requirements under the Government's transparency agenda to publish information in *Starting Gate* reports, and for making decisions on prior redaction related to commercial, policy, personal data or other sensitivities justifiable under the FOI Act 2000.

Decisions on FOI requests made to the Cabinet Office or to the MPA for disclosure of *Starting Gate* information will be taken on a case-by-case basis, and the MPA will consult the owning department before reaching a disclosure decision.

If your department receives an FOI request for *Starting Gate* information it is important that you consult the MPA immediately. This is to ensure coordination of approach in respect of the MPA's overall interest as owner of the *Starting Gate* process. The MPA also has an insight in dealing with such requests and will be able to assist your department in responding.

Glossary of acronyms used

Acronym	What it means
COE	Centre of Excellence
DAC	Departmental Assurance Coordinator (may also be called a Departmental Gateway Coordinator or DGC)
GMPP	Government Major Projects Portfolio
IAAP	Integrated Assurance and Approval Plan
MPA	Major Projects Authority in the Cabinet Office
NAO	National Audit Office
NDPB	Non Departmental Public Body
PMO	Portfolio/Programme/Project Management Office
PPMSU	Programme and Project Management Support Unit
PS	Project Specialist responsible for MPA liaison with the department
RL	Resource Leader in the MPA
RTL	Review Team Leader
SCS	Senior Civil Service/Servant (Deputy Director and above)
SPO	Senior Policy Owner
SRO	Senior Responsible Owner for delivery of the subsequent project

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Any enquiries or comments regarding this document should be sent to us at:

MPA-Info@cabinet-office.gsi.gov.uk

This document is also available to download from our website at:

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/major-projects-authority-assurance-toolkit>

More information about the Major Projects Authority, and guidance for central government bodies on the requirements from April 2011 for integrated assurance and approvals, is available from our website at: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/content/major-projects-authority>

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