This document is guidance supporting the Government Functional Standard for Project Delivery, which sets expectations for the direction and management of portfolios, programmes and projects within government.

References are shown in square brackets [ ] and listed at the end of the document.
Contents

1. About this guidance 5
2. What is accountability? 6
3. Key project leadership roles 6
  3.1 The role of the senior responsible owner 6
  3.1.1 The business case 7
  3.1.2 Governance and assurance 7
  3.1.3 Delivery of objectives, outcomes and benefits 7
  3.2 The SRO’s relationship with the accounting officer 8
  3.3 The SRO’s relationship with the project director 8
  3.4 The SRO’s relationship with the portfolio 9
  3.5 The SRO’s relationship with the sponsor 12
4. Appointments 13
  4.1 Appointing the SRO 13
  4.1.1 Selecting the SRO 13
  4.1.2 SRO capacity: full-time or part-time? 13
  4.1.3 Interim SROs 14
  4.1.4 The SRO appointment letter 14
  4.2 Appointing the project director 15
  4.3 Updating appointment letters 15
5. Practical considerations 15
  5.1 Choosing an SRO: things to consider 15
  5.2 Support and development for senior responsible owners 16

Table: Comparison of the roles of the senior responsible owner and project director 10-11

6. References [i-xiv] 18
1. About this guidance

Strong leadership with clear accountability are key elements of successful project delivery. The requirement to appoint a senior responsible owner (SRO) for a programme or project has been established in government for over two decades, and is now mandated in the government functional standard for project delivery.\(^1\)

The purpose of this guidance is to set out clearly in one document:

- Requirements and supporting guidance for senior responsible owners of projects in the government major projects portfolio (GMPP); and
- Guidance for senior responsible owners of non-GMPP projects.

The guidance describes the role of the senior responsible owner (SRO) and its relationship to other key leadership roles in project delivery; within the project, the project director or manager, and within the wider organisation, the accounting officer. Confusion about these project leadership roles has the potential to create risk in terms of strategic project governance, undermine accountability, and so jeopardise success in project delivery. Clarifying what each role is accountable for and how they relate to each other is therefore a key area of focus.

The guidance also sets out current requirements on the appointment of SROs and appointment letters, and provides additional information to help with the selection, support and development of SROs.

The content of this guidance complies with the government functional standard for project delivery. This sets expectations for the direction and management of portfolios, programmes and projects within government, and is an essential reference for all SROs, accounting officers and project directors.

As in the government functional standard for project delivery, this document uses the term project to denote programmes and projects, and the guidance applies equally to both. Consequently, the term project director is used in this guidance in its most generic form, whether that be project director, managing a project, or programme director, managing a programme.

This guidance also draws on guidance for civil servants, giving evidence to select committees, issued by the Cabinet Office in September 2014, also known as the osmotherly rules. These require that the key project accountabilities and responsibilities should be clearly defined, and set out particular requirements for senior responsible owners of projects in the government major projects portfolio (GMPP).\(^2\)

---

2. The government major projects portfolio (GMPP) is an evolving portfolio of the most complex and strategically significant projects and programmes across government. It is overseen by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) and covers around 133 major projects with a total whole life cost approaching £442 billion (Infrastructure and Projects Authority annual report, Cabinet Office, 2019) [ref. i]
2. What is accountability?

The key principle in the government functional standard for project delivery is that all accountabilities and responsibilities are defined, mutually consistent and traceable across all levels of management. In other words:

- The accountable person is the individual who is ultimately answerable for an activity or decision. This includes ‘yes’ or ‘no’ authority and veto power. Only one accountable person can be held to account. An accountable person has to be accountable to someone for something. Accountability cannot be delegated or shared.

- The responsible person is the individual who actually undertakes the task: in other words, they manage the action / implementation. Responsibility can be shared. The degree of responsibility is determined by the individual with the accountability.

3. Key project leadership roles

In government project delivery there are three critical leadership roles.

- The senior responsible owner (SRO) is accountable for ensuring a programme or project meets its objectives, delivers the projected outcomes and realises the required benefits. SROs of GMPP projects are also accountable to Parliament.

- The accounting officer (AO) is accountable to Parliament and public for high standards of probity in the management of public funds;

- The project director (PD) is accountable to the senior responsible owner for the day to day management of the project.

These roles are discussed in more detail in the sections below.

3.1 The role of the senior responsible owner

The senior responsible owner is ultimately accountable for a programme or project meeting its objectives, delivering the projected outcomes and realising the required benefits. He or she is the owner of the business case and accountable for all aspects of governance. The government standard for project delivery notes that responsibilities of the role include:

- defining and communicating the vision and business objectives in line with policy
- ensuring a real business need is being addressed
- assuring ongoing viability, and if necessary taking the decision to stop the project
- engaging key stakeholders
- providing the team with leadership, decisions and direction
- ensuring the delivered solution meets the needs of the business

However, these are only some of the areas of accountability, and a full list is set out in the table on p.10-11.
The functional standard also requires it to be clear who the senior responsible owner is accountable to. For all projects the senior responsible owner is accountable to the accounting officer and through them to Parliament. The relationship with the accounting officer may be a direct reporting line or may be through others in the organisation’s management line (e.g. a more senior individual, or body such as a sponsoring group, portfolio or investment board).

The senior responsible owner of a project or programme within the government major projects portfolio (GMPP), as well as being accountable to their own organisation’s management, also has personal accountability to Parliament for the implementation of the government’s policies as assigned to them by the relevant accounting officer. This accountability is recorded in the senior responsible owner’s letter of appointment.

3.1.1 The business case

The senior responsible owner is the owner of the project’s business case, is the primary risk owner, and is responsible for ensuring that the project meets its objectives, delivers the required outcomes and realises the required benefits. This not only means monitoring progress on the project, but also the context within which the project will deliver. Sometimes a valid project can become redundant because the reason for its initiation no longer exists or has changed substantially. In this case, the senior responsible owner should consider whether to take the decision to stop the project.

3.1.2 Governance and assurance

The senior responsible owner is accountable for ensuring that the project has in place a governance and assurance regime that is effective, proportionate and appropriate. This will enable the project to deliver successfully and allow them to discharge their duties in terms of accountability.

The SRO also chairs the project board and is responsible for ensuring the right expertise throughout the life cycle of the project. Whilst the project director or project office might recommend how governance is designed for a particular project and put such governance in place, it is the responsibility of the senior responsible owner to ensure that it is effective, proportionate and appropriate.

3.1.3 Delivery of objectives, outcomes and benefits

The senior responsible owner needs to ensure that the project director has defined a project’s management and working practices so that they lead to the planned outcomes. In addition the senior responsible owner will need to ensure that project risk is managed throughout the project lifecycle by invoking appropriate stage gates, assurance reviews and decision points.

Finally, the senior responsible owner is responsible for ensuring successful transition to live service or operations. This includes delivery of the agreed project outcomes and benefits, or ensuring that accountability is transferred to appropriate business ownership, for example through the senior business owner, to ensure that benefits are realised after the project has closed.
More information on the role and responsibilities of the SRO can be found in managing successful programmes and in the accompanying survival guide for senior responsible owners.5

3.2 The SRO’s relationship with the accounting officer

Each government organisation is required to appoint an accounting officer who must be able to assure Parliament and the public of high standards of probity in the management of public funds, including all programmes and projects sponsored from that department. This person is usually its most senior official, the permanent secretary or chief executive, who is required routinely to scrutinise significant policy proposals, projects or plans.

Accounting officer assessments are required for all major projects prior to submission to HM Treasury for approval for the outline business case, and subsequently if there are any material changes.

For a GMPP project, the SRO is accountable directly to the accounting officer but for other projects, this might be through others in the organisation’s management structure, for example another senior official or sponsoring group. In all cases, there should be no doubt as to the formal relationship and reporting required between the senior responsible owner and the accounting officer; this should be defined in the project initiation documentation and kept up to date.

Further guidance on the responsibilities of the accounting officer (AO) can be found in HM Treasury guidance on managing public money.6

To enable the accounting officer to fulfil their obligations, in accordance with guidance on managing public money, a senior responsible owner needs to advise them of any significant issues relating to regularity, propriety, feasibility and value for money, as well as any significant deviations from the approved business case, which might lead them to reassess the project. Full guidance on the preparation of an accounting officer assessment, and publication of summary assessments, can be found in HM Treasury guidance on making an accounting officer assessment.7

3.3 The SRO’s relationship with the project director

The senior responsible owner’s relationship with the project management organisation is through the project director, who is normally appointed by the senior responsible owner. The project director is a full-time role, accountable to the senior responsible owner for driving, on a day to day basis, the delivery of the project outcomes within agreed time, cost and quality constraints.

The duties of the project director include ensuring that:

- the project is appropriately resourced and organised
- the budget requirements are defined and managed within agreed limits
- risks and issues are identified and managed

5 Managing successful programmes, 2011, and the MSP survival guide for senior responsible owners, 2016, both published by Axelos. [ref. iv]
6 Managing public money, HM Treasury, 2015 [ref. vi]
7 Accounting officer assessments: guidance, HM Treasury, 2017 [ref. vii]
• there is effective communication with key stakeholders
• effective project controls are in place
• the project team’s activities are lawful and ethical
• accurate and timely reporting is carried out.

The project director is responsible for all day-to-day decisions.

In the case of a programme, a programme director is likely to have several project directors or managers reporting to them, with each being accountable to the programme director for the day to day management of the project assigned to them. The programme director remains accountable for:

• ensuring all the responsibilities in the programme are adequately assigned and undertaken;
• maintaining the reporting and relationship with the senior responsible owner.

The key to a successful relationship between a senior responsible owner and a project director is understanding each other's role and agreeing how they want to work together:

• the senior responsible owner steers and champions the project;
• the project director directs the project.

It is important that the senior responsible owner allows the project director the freedom to manage the project within agreed tolerances while also providing appropriate challenge and support.

Table on p.10-11 sets out the accountabilities of the senior responsible owner role alongside those typical of the project director. This covers the core requirements common across all projects and should be considered a minimum. More information on project delivery leadership and other roles is set out in the project delivery capability framework (PDCF).8

### 3.4 The SRO’s relationship with the portfolio

SROs may have responsibility for several linked projects or programmes within an overall portfolio. However, the SRO’s accountabilities are specific to the project or programme for which they are responsible, and each should be considered and managed as a separate SRO appointment.

In portfolio structures, it is important to ensure that the SRO can devote enough time to all of the projects for which they are accountable. Where necessary, a portfolio director and/or a dedicated portfolio office may be established to provide overarching oversight and support, but these must not override or confuse the direct accountability that the SRO has for individual projects.

Although directly accountable for their own project an SRO is also expected to support delivery of the organisation’s overall strategic objectives. This means that he or she is expected to work collaboratively with other SROs and project directors in adjacent projects, and with the
Comparison of the roles of the senior responsible owner and project director

### Senior responsible owner (SRO)

**What is the purpose of this role?**

The senior responsible owner is accountable for a programme or project meeting its objectives, delivering the required outcomes and realising the required benefits. The senior responsible owner of a government major project is accountable to Parliament. For other projects it shall be clear who (which sponsoring group) the senior responsible owner is accountable to. The senior responsible owner steers and champions the project.

**Typical Profile**

Should ideally hold a leadership position within the organisation and have control or influence over the business area or resources into which the project outcomes will be delivered.

### Project director

**What is the purpose of this role?**

The project director is accountable to the senior responsible owner for establishing the governance framework and for the day-to-day management of a programme/project to deliver the desired outcomes and outputs and realise the required benefits. They are responsible for driving the delivery of the project and overseeing it to ensure that the objectives are clearly defined and achieved within the agreed time, cost and quality constraints. The project director directs the project.

**Typical Profile**

Should be a project delivery professional with relevant knowledge and experience of the type and complexity of project to be delivered. Will have proven project leadership capabilities.

#### Accountabilities of the role

**Leadership**

Leads and manages the project and the project team on a day to day basis.

**Design**

Establishes the temporary organisation in line with the agreed design.

**Delivery**

Creates and leads the project to deliver the agreed outcomes within time, cost and quality constraints.

**Project Management**

Provides effective leadership and management controls. Sets project controls and “stop / go” decision points. Designs the project structure and organisation appropriate to the stage of the project. Sets appropriate delivery methodologies. Manages effective transition between project phases.

**Business Case**

Develops the business case and supports the SRO in delivering the business case objectives.

**Budget**

Develops the budget and delivery within budget.

**Resources**

Identifies skill requirements for all stages of the project. Recruits resources within budget constraints and effectively deploys them. Builds the project team; delegates roles and responsibilities, develops capability and fosters innovation.

**Benefit Realisation**

Translates agreed business case benefits into project outcomes and manages delivery of those outcomes.

**Stakeholder Management**

Ensures stakeholder interests are identified and addressed. Manages stakeholder communications and ensures buy-in. Forms collaborative relationships with key stakeholders both internally and externally. Works collaboratively with the senior responsible owner to jointly manage senior stakeholders.

**Risks & Issues**

Manages risks and issues and escalates to the senior responsible owner where appropriate.

**Governance**

Provides all reporting as required by the senior responsible owner. Establishes and manages quality assurance and change control.

**Assurance**

Engages on assurance activities and reviews, and acts on recommendations.

**Change Management**

Ensures effective change control is in place to agree and document changes to project scope and deliverables as agreed with the senior responsible owner and other stakeholders.

**Guidance & Support**

Provides support, guidance and coaching for the project team. Promotes effective individual and team performance.

**Project Planning & Control**

Develops and agrees the vision and measurable success criteria with the senior responsible owner. Develops and maintains the project plan and integrates with other inter-dependent projects. Monitors and controls project progress and performance, and reports regularly to the Senior responsible owner. Ensures appropriate standards, good practice and lessons learned are sought and applied. Ensures the product / transition deliverables are well defined and agreed with stakeholders. Manages project closure and sign-off.
organisation’s portfolio office and portfolio director, to manage dependencies, resources, schedules and funding to support delivery of the totality of change the organisation needs to achieve its strategic objectives.

Sometimes this may mean slowing down the delivery of one project to support delivery of another. While this may appear to be in tension with the SRO’s personal accountability for delivery of their project, it is entirely consistent with an SRO’s responsibility to respond to changes in the operating context. If conflicting priorities between projects cannot be resolved between the SROs concerned, however, they may ultimately need be referred to the accounting officer for decision.

3.5 The SRO’s relationship with the sponsor

In some departments the project organisation structure also includes the role of sponsor, but not always in the same way. For example:

- the sponsor may be considered to be at a very senior level or part of a sponsoring group, above the SRO;
- within small projects, sponsor may be used as an alternative term for SRO;
- in the context of a programme, a sponsor may take on some of the SRO’s accountabilities for a particular project within the programme e.g. acting on behalf of the SRO for that project as project sponsor;
- for projects involving several organisations, a sponsor may be appointed in each organisation to act as the senior owner of that organisation’s interests.

In all cases, the following should be recognised.

- The senior responsible owner is still ultimately accountable for the delivery of the project and for ensuring the project meets its objectives, delivers the projected outcomes and realises the required benefits.
- Where a sponsor role is used within a programme or project structure, their accountabilities and responsibilities should be defined and referenced against those of the senior responsible owner, as set out in this document, to ensure there is no duplication or omission. Any duplications should be either resolved or clearly defined, recorded and communicated to all concerned.
- Under no circumstances shall the accountabilities of the senior responsible owner be compromised in any way.

---

8 Project delivery capability framework, Cabinet Office, 2017 [ref. viii]
4. Appointments

4.1 Appointing the SRO

Accountabilities should be assigned on all new projects from an early stage and shall be formalised before the project seeks initial investment approval. This process starts with the appointment of the SRO.

Ideally, the senior responsible owner is someone who holds a leadership position within the organisation into which the project’s benefits and outcomes will be delivered, and has control or influence over that business area or operating environment. Sometimes it will be necessary to create a new leadership role for an incoming SRO. In this case, it is important to consider the relationship of the role with the wider business area or operating environment.

In projects using agile, the SRO may also be the service owner or product owner, depending on where the SRO role is best placed. However, the SRO role and the associated accountabilities relate specifically to delivery of the project or programme, and should not be confused with these other roles.

4.1.1 Selecting the SRO

The decision to appoint an SRO to a new project, or to an existing project following the departure of a previous SRO, should be given careful consideration. Arrangements for appointment of SROs should be clearly set out as part of functional governance for project delivery in each department or organisation.

Decisions on appointments to GMPP projects will need to involve the accounting officer, although the selection may be carried out by a senior panel, for example drawn from the wider sponsor group. Appointing SROs to non-GMPP roles may be tailored accordingly. Panels must also give full regard to diversity and inclusion when appointing SROs, as well as the principles of fair and open competition.

4.1.2 SRO capacity: full-time or part-time?

The role of senior responsible owner is a substantial time commitment. The role may be full time or part time, depending on the scope, scale and complexity of the project, its relationship with the rest of the organisation, and the relative strength of the combined SRO/project director team, for example in terms of experience, knowledge and skills. A person may be SRO for more than one project at a time, for example where there is a group of linked projects.

The overriding requirement, however, is that the SRO is able to devote the necessary time to the project to execute their SRO responsibilities fully.

For government major projects, the IPA will work with departments to agree whether an SRO appointment should be on a full time basis, the starting presumption for GMPP projects, or alternatively what the appropriate time commitment should be. For non-GMPP projects the
senior official appointing to the role should discuss the time commitment needed with the head of profession and/or accounting officer.

4.1.3 Interim SROs

Where a suitable SRO cannot be found in the time available, an interim SRO appointment may be necessary. This should be formalised in the same way as for a permanent appointment, recording that the appointment is interim and its expected term. Arrangements should then be put in place to appoint permanent SRO as soon as possible.

4.1.4 The SRO appointment letter

The senior responsible owner of a GMPP project shall discuss and agree the terms of their appointment at the outset of the project, or at the point when they join. These terms shall be set out in a formal letter of appointment from their organisation’s accounting officer and the chief executive of the IPA, as required by the osmotherly rules. Once a project has had an initial business case approved, the appointment letter shall be published on the department’s website.

Should it become necessary to tailor the requirements of the osmotherly rules to reflect a project’s unique circumstances, this should be kept to a minimum, justified and formally recorded in each case.

It is good practice to use this approach for all senior responsible owners, even if the project is not a GMPP project, with appointment approval and signature arrangements tailored as appropriate. Publication of appointment letters for non-GMPP projects is not required.

The appointment letter should set out:

- The point at which the senior responsible owner becomes accountable for the project
- The time they are expected to commit to the project
- The tenure of the role, linked to key milestones on the project
- The extent and limit of their accountability
- A clear statement of the status of the project, identifying material issues and constraints
- The SRO’s objectives and performance criteria, covering delivery of the project, projected outcomes and required benefits
- Decision powers, controls and delegated authority
- Key interfaces and relationships, particularly with the business owner of the delivered project
- Any expected development or other requirements of the SRO

The appointment letter provides the opportunity for the senior responsible owner to consider the basis on which the project has been, or is being established, and to raise any concerns with the accounting officer, before signing the letter to show they accept these as terms of their appointment.
The requirement to approve the appointment also provides the opportunity for the accounting officer and chief executive of the IPA, as government head of function for project delivery, to satisfy themselves that the appointment is appropriate and to raise any concerns. Ultimately, however, the decision on appointment rests with the accounting officer.

### 4.2 Appointing the project director

The SRO will normally be responsible for appointing the project director. It is good practice for the senior responsible owner also to agree an appointment letter with the project director. This should set out key responsibilities and expectations in line with this guidance and include any other specific requirements relating to the project.

As part of this the senior responsible owner and project director should discuss and reach a clear and common understanding of their respective accountabilities and responsibilities. Where the project director does not report directly to the senior responsible owner it is recommended that the project director's line manager is also included in these conversations to avoid any later misunderstandings.

### 4.3 Updating appointment letters

It is good practice to review appointment letters at least annually, as part of objective setting, or after any significant changes to the business case, to ensure that these remain up to date. A new letter should also be issued if a new SRO or project director is appointed.

### 5. Practical considerations

#### 5.1 Choosing an SRO: things to consider

Having the right project leadership is a critical factor in the successful delivery of a project, and the choice of SRO therefore needs careful consideration. When deciding who should be the SRO for a project, particular consideration should be given to the following factors:

- **Position:** the SRO will normally hold a leadership position within the permanent organisation and will have control or influence over the business area or resources into which the project outcomes will be delivered.
- **Capacity:** the SRO must have the necessary time to carry out their responsibilities, taking account of any other responsibilities and commitments they may have.
- **Tenure:** the SRO needs to be able to commit to leading the project through to completion or to an appropriate milestone.
- **Knowledge, skills and experience:** the SRO may need particular subject matter knowledge (for example in a particular sector or policy domain), or professional skills,
depending on the nature of the project. SROs are also expected to have prior experience of project delivery and to have completed, or to complete, appropriate development (for example, the major projects leadership programme for GMPP projects – see section 5.2 below).

Personal attributes: the SRO’s key attributes, as defined in managing successful programmes, are to:

- Have the seniority for the responsibilities and accountabilities the role involves
- Be proactive and visible as the driving force behind the programme
- Possess strong leadership and decision-making skills
- Have the experience, character and personality that are right for the programme
- Combine realism with openness and the clarity of expression to communicate the programme’s vision effectively
- Be able to give purpose and direction to the programme and take strategic decisions
- Focus on delivery of the benefits and achievement of the end goal
- Build productive relationships across the programme team
- Have access to and credibility with key stakeholders.

When choosing an SRO, diversity and inclusion, and fair and open competition, should be given full consideration, both in terms of the design of the role and the process through which it is filled.

5.2 Support and development for senior responsible owners

Project leadership, particularly of major projects, can be complex and challenging, and it is important that senior responsible owners, project directors, and people in their teams, receive appropriate support and development throughout the life of the project.

Support and development for the senior responsible owners should be discussed with the accounting officer, senior manager or head of profession when they are first appointed to lead the project and then as part of ongoing performance management. Particular consideration should be given to the induction and development of new SROs:

- A one day programme, leading as an SRO, is provided through the civil service leadership academy, and attendance is required for all new senior responsible owners
- All senior responsible owners of projects or programmes in the government major projects portfolio are expected to attend, or to have graduated from, the major projects leadership

9 Managing successful programmes, fourth edition, Axelos, 2011 [ref. iv]
academy (MPLA). The only exceptions to this are where the prospective SRO is agreed to have recognised ‘master builder’ experience and/or has an equivalent qualification in major project delivery at masters level or above.

Even where MPLA has been completed, all SROs should have ongoing development plans and support, tailored to their individual requirements. These may include, for example, ongoing mentoring, coaching or buddy arrangements, and participation in other development activities at organisation or cross-government level, and networking.

SROs should give similar consideration to the development and support of project directors. The project delivery capability framework (PDCF) sets out the range of development opportunities open to project leaders and their teams, and additional guidance on this is available on the IPA website.

Further guidance on the role of SROs can also be found in the following documents:

- Government functional standard for project delivery
- PRINCE2\textsuperscript{10}
- Managing successful programmes
- The art of brilliance, a handbook for SROs of transformation programmes
- Assurance review briefing note for SROs

Full details are provided in Section 6.

\textsuperscript{10} Managing successful projects with PRINCE2, sixth edition, Axelos, 2017 [ref. x ]
\textsuperscript{11} Managing successful programmes, fourth edition, Axelos, 2011 [ref. iv ]
\textsuperscript{12} The art of brilliance: A handbook for SROs of transformation programmes, Cabinet Office, 2019 [ref. xi ]
\textsuperscript{13} Assurance review briefing note for SROs [ref. xiv ]
6. References

i. Infrastructure and Projects Authority annual report, Cabinet Office, 2019

ii. Government functional standard for project delivery, Cabinet Office, 2018

iii. Osmotherly rules: giving evidence to select committees, guidance for civil servants, Cabinet Office, 2014


v. MSP® survival guide for senior responsible owners, Axelos, 2016

vi. Managing public money, HM Treasury, 2015

vii. Accounting officer assessments: guidance, HM Treasury, 2017

viii. Project delivery capability framework, Cabinet Office, 2017

ix. The role of the senior responsible owner (this document), Cabinet Office, 2019

x. Managing successful projects with PRINCE2®, 6th edition, Axelos, 2017

xi. The art of brilliance: a handbook for SROs of transformation programmes, Cabinet Office, 2019


Contact IPA
Web: www.gov.uk/ipa
Email: ipa@ipa.gov.uk

Cabinet Office Correspondence team
70 Whitehall London SW1A 2AS
Email: publiccorrespondence@cabinetoffice.gov.uk
General enquiries: 020 7276 1234