



Implementing Functional Standards

A guide for sponsor teams, and arm's length bodies

Purpose of guide

The purpose of this reference guide is to support sponsor body teams in departments, and their arm's length bodies in the implementation of functional standards.

What are functions and standards

A government function is a cross government grouping embedded into departments and arm's length bodies to manage specialist work such as HR, project delivery and security. The purpose of each function is summarised on the [government functions guidance page](#) on gov.uk. A function harnesses the skills of people from any relevant government profession.

A [functional standard](#) sets the expectations for the management of a function's work across government.

[Functional standard GovS 001, Government functions](#), addresses the purpose of functions and what is required of their leaders. The other standards set expectations for the management of their respective function's work.

The standards clarify what should already be happening in every organisation and working as a suite cross-reference, where appropriate, to the functional standards they rely on.

The standards drive coherence, consistency and continuous improvement, to support the enduring principles and requirements set out in [Managing Public Money](#).

[Continuous improvement assessment frameworks](#) set levels of maturity (using 'good', 'better' and 'best' criteria) against the most important aspects of a standard and makes it easy for organisations to understand how mature they are in relation the standard, and where they should aim to improve.

Mandate of standards

Functional standards were mandated for use across government (including arm's length bodies) in September 2021, and may also be adopted by other public sector organisations, see [Dear Accounting Officer letter DAO 05/21](#).

Consistent language used in standards

A functional standard uses consistent language and agreed definitions. Standards state what is mandatory (shall) and strongly advisory (should). They also share a [common glossary of terms](#) to be used in the organisation's documentation so people are clear on what is meant – avoiding misunderstandings.

Appropriate and proportionate use of standards

The standards should be applied proportionately to the size and complexity of the functional work done in an organisation and used together with continuous improvement assessment frameworks to drive improvement over time.

Each organisation may decide how to conform with the standard in practice, taking advice from the relevant functional leader either in an organisation/parent department or across government.



Sponsorship and functional standards

Each standard has a standard owner (often the head of the function) and standard manager who are accountable for establishing, controlling and championing the use of the functional standard.

Functional leaders in departments and arm's length bodies are accountable to their accounting officers for adopting the relevant function's standard, and ensuring the organisation's strategy and plans take account of cross-government functional strategies and plans.

A department's principal accounting officer needs to be assured that their sponsored arm's length bodies are complying with Managing Public Money and relevant functional standards.

Functional leaders in parent departments should work with their sponsorship leads to ensure that the department's arm's length bodies have the information, tools and capacity to adopt relevant functional standards.

Each arm's length body should have a senior officer accountable for managing a function for all relevant functional areas. An arm's length body's accounting officer may appoint one individual to take responsibility for more than one function.

Further information can be found in both the Standard, GovS 001 - Government Functions and the Sponsorship code of practice.

Governance and management framework

Functional leaders in arm's length bodies should incorporate, wherever practicable, the cross-government requirements and guidance set by the centre of function into their own governance and management frameworks. Functional leaders in parent departments and

arm's length bodies should ensure locally tailored material is aligned to the standards, providing the 'how' to meet the 'what' and 'why' in the standard.

The governance of each function should be an integrated part of that arm's length bodies overall governance. Clause 4.1 in each functional standard includes specific information related to the governance and management of the function.

Continuous improvement

Alongside functional standards, it is recommended that there is a continuous improvement assessment framework. These can be used to determine the extent to which a functional standard is being applied within and across organisations.

These frameworks are management tools are intended to give organisations an objective way of seeing how they're doing, and how good they need to be.

By setting ambition for each function, and understanding how well it is doing against its ambition, an arm's length bodies leadership team can set priorities for improvement of its most important functional work. Insight from the assessments can help in setting a functional strategy and plans.

Before starting an assessment, a parent department and its arm's length bodies should work together to define the boundaries of the organisation/organisations being assessed.

Sponsor teams should help the functional leaders in their arm's length bodies to facilitate honest self-appraisal and develop their improvement action plans. Ambitions for improvement should be based on business needs and cost effective. The centre of the function may ask organisations to share self-assessments, this is to encourage peer review and sharing of best practice.