**Undertaking Project and Programme Assurance Reviews**

**Guide to Preparing an Assurance Review Report**

#### Introduction

Review Teams are asked to focus primarily on risk when delivering National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA) led Assurance Reviews. The Review Team will highlight key risks, issues or concerns to the deliverability of the programme/project objectives. Recommendations will be more aligned to the resolution and management of these, and the Stage Gate Assessment (SGA) will be based on the severity and urgency of the risk.

The key benefits of moving to a risk based approach are as follows:

* It will provide greater clarity on critical delivery risks to programmes and projects, and on how NISTA’s recommendations address those risks;
* It will improve the clarity of the NISTA view on what the programme/project can and cannot control by separating risks and blockers;
* By highlighting risks and blockers it will provide further clarity on the factors driving the SGA;
* SGAs will be based on clear evidence based risks and blockers will be more objective;
* Analysis of risks and blockers will enable targeted analysis to identify key themes and challenges thus enabling a more holistic cross government approach to resolution;
* By highlighting and analysing key risks and blockers NISTA will be better able to support departments by focusing its own offer around areas of critical need and by escalating environmental factors impacting programme/ project delivery highlighted in the report;
* Drawing out and prioritising specific risks will enable the programme/project team to focus effort on managing and resolving the risk in order of greatest detrimental effect on the programme/project;
* Clearly articulating the risks will enable future reviews to focus on whether the risk has been removed rather than whether the recommendation has been implemented;
* Highlighting risks to deliverability will enable NISTA to help the programme/project to secure appropriate focussed support exactly where needed; and
* Analysis of risks and blockers will enable NISTA to continually improve the Gate Review process and continue to focus the Review Teams on the most impactful areas.

#### From the 1st April 2021, what was then the IPA (now NISTA)moved to a 3 tier Stage Gate Assessment (SGA) RAG status (Red, Amber, Green).

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

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#### The purpose of this Guidance

The purpose of this guidance is to help the Review Team prepare an Assurance Review Report in line with making risk based recommendations. It will also be of interest to the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) and Programme/ Project teams preparing to be reviewed.

#### Components of an Assurance Review Report

The Assurance Review Report (the Report) will be based on a template that is provided by NISTA. Please do not make any changes to the template without discussing and agreeing them with the AL first.

[1.](#_heading=h.1fob9te) Stage Gate Assessment (SGA) 2

[2.](#_heading=h.3znysh7) Summary of Concerns, Evidence and Recommendations 10

[3.](#_heading=h.2et92p0) Recording Blockers to Delivery 13

## Stage Gate Assessment (SGA)

### What is a Stage Gate Assessment?

A Stage Gate Assessment (SGA) is the outcome of an independent NISTA Assurance Review. The SGA, made by the Review Team, is RAG rated and reflects the Review Teams confidence in the project or programme ability to deliver its aims and objectives:

* Within the timescales;
* Within the cost envelope; and
* To the quality requirements including the delivery of benefits, both financial and non-financial all as laid down in the most recent formally approved mandating document (e.g. Project Initiation Document (PID) or Business Case).

The Stage Gate Assessment should consider:

* Specific issues or risks that threaten delivery to time, cost, and quality and jeopardise the delivery of benefits;
* The Review Team’s professional judgement of the likelihood of the project or programme succeeding even though there may be no definitively clear evidence either way; and
* The resilience of the project or programme to overcome identified shortcomings or threats.

The Stage Gate Assessment is also influenced by:

* A project or programme’s use of established best practice; and
* Generic indicators of project/programme health which are outlined in this guidance.

### Stage Gate Assessment Descriptions

From 1 April 2021, what was then the IPA (now NISTA)moved to a 3 tier SGA RAG status (Red, Amber, Green). The SGA is based on the following definitions:

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

#### The Stage Gate Assessment Recommendation

The SGA now comes with a recommended course of action for the programme/project, which is included in the table above. This should not influence the outcome of the review, however, the Review Team must be aware of it as it may change the nature of the SRO conversation if the DCA rating is Red or Amber/Red.

**Red Stage Gate Assessment**

Where a programme/project receives a Red:

* The final assurance report will be reported to the Accounting Officer (AO), and HMT and other CO Officials in order to proactively escalate and agree next steps; and
* An Assurance of Action Plan (AAP) review will be scheduled within the next 12 weeks.

**Deriving a Stage Gate Assessment**

The Review Team should base their Stage Gate Assessment on the evidence they have gathered as part of the review. To assist Review Teams this guide includes descriptions of a number of indicators of project and programme health that should be considered in addition to the time, cost, quality and benefits realisation dimensions. These indicators are not intended to be exhaustive. All projects and programmes are different and the Review Team should also take account of any major concerns, challenges, and examples of best practice or other attributes that are unique to the project or programme when reaching their assessment.

This guidance includes the RAG definitions for each of the elements or indicators that inform the SGA rating. Review Teams may find it helpful to informally “score” the different elements as part of their deliberations but they are not expected to record an individual RAG score for each of the elements. Review Teams should remember that the SGA is not a calculation and these elements are not the only factors that should be considered when making a Stage Gate Assessment.

**Stage Gate Assessment and a Programme/ Project’s Lifecycle**

Assurance reviews take place at different points in a programme/project’s lifecycle and the Review Team will need to consider the relative importance of the individual aspects of the SGA given the stage the programme/project has reached. *The project and programme delivery lifecycle are set out in the* ***Project Delivery Functional Standard.***

When a programme/project is being set up and has yet to complete its business case the clarity of scope, the viability of the governance structure and the buy-in from the Authority leadership may dominate the SGA. Where a programme/project is in delivery factors like the appropriateness of processes being used and the skills and capabilities of resources may have more weight. In the early lifecycle stages, management processes such as planning, risk management, etc. are often being developed, and a full complement of skilled resources has yet to be recruited.

**A Stage Gate Assessment is not an assessment of theoretical deliverability in isolation**

The Review Team may consider that the programme/project’s aims are quite capable of being achieved and may even have seen examples of similar programmes/projects that have succeeded. The SGA is about whether the programme/project, as constituted and on its current trajectory, is likely to achieve a successful outcome and should therefore progress at this point.

When making their SGA Review Teams are not expected to consider every scenario that might affect a programme/project’s progress but to reasonably extrapolate from the programme/project’s past progress, current status and declared plans whether a successful outcome will be achieved. When forming their view, Review Teams should consider the programme/ project as they found it and prior to the implementation of any recommendations included in their report.

**The Stage Gate Assessment is a holistic view**

This document sets out areas for Review Team consideration when forming the SGA. It is important that these are not used in isolation and that the Review Teams consider the overall coherence of the programme/ project and the way in which the various components fit together. It is possible for the SGA to be quite low for a programme/ project that has many areas of excellence that are nonetheless sadly out of step with each other. When a project is part of a wider programme, lack of coherence between the project’s aims and progress and the higher-level programme’s vision can jeopardise the likelihood of either achieving success.

### The SGA and risk based recommendations

The aim of a NISTA Independent assurance review is to help ensure the project/programme achieves a successful outcome and any risk based recommendations will naturally focus on immediate priorities. The Review Team should ensure that they also include appropriate recommendations to address key risks they have identified to help the project/programme achieve a successful outcome in the longer term.

The SGA is not directly linked to the level of priority given to all or any of the individual recommendations; however, there should be a clear relationship between the risks and concerns identified and the SGA, particularly in relation to the programme/ project’s ability to deliver to time, cost and quality. The Review Team should discuss these relationships explicitly.

It is therefore possible for a Review Team to have a very high level of confidence in the programme/project’s ability to deliver and assign it an overall SGA rating of Green, while at the same time identifying one or more risk based recommendations that are very important and need to be actioned immediately.

### SGA- Key Indicators

The following sections contain guidance on the key indicators that underpin a Stage Gate assessment.

#### Time

This indicator reflects the confidence that the project/programme will achieve its declared End Date:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  Colour |  Criteria Description |
| Green | The project/programme is on or ahead of schedule. |
| Amber | The project/programme is behind schedule but has realistic plans to recover.  |
| Red | The project/programme is behind schedule and is likely to be delivered late. The project / programme plan is likely to require re-baselining. |

#### Total Project/Programme Costs

This indicator should be based on the figures quoted in the Strategic/Outline/Final Business Case as drawn up in line with HM Treasury Guidance;

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  Colour |  Criteria Description |
| Green | The project/programme costs are on, or below, budget. |
| Amber | The project/programme costs are over budget but with realistic plans to recover. |
| Red | The project/programme costs are likely to be over budget to a degree that re-baselining will be necessary. |

#### Benefits (Financial and Non-Financial)

This indicator is the confidence that the project/programme will realise, or deliver, its intended benefits. For the (rare) programmes/projects whose scope is to only deliver capability and where the delivery of benefits is covered in a different part of the programme, or is deemed to be the responsibility of to Business as Usual (BAU), this element may focus on the quality of the outcome:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  Colour |  Criteria Description |
| Green | The project/programme is confident of delivering benefits.  |
| Amber | The project/programme is experiencing some issues in their ability to deliver benefits but the situation is recoverable. |
| Red | Benefits delivery is at serious risk. |

#### Aims and Scope

This indicator considers:

* The boundaries of the project/programme in terms of processes, functional areas and organisations;
* What is included in the scope of the project/programme and what is not;
* The definition of outcomes and benefits, with tangible measures and an understanding of the evidence required by which success will be judged – this will normally include timescales; and
* The degree of clarity, stability and understanding by stakeholders of the above as a solid foundation for the project/programme.

This aspect should include an assessment of how well defined the vision is and the stage of development of the overall design, e.g. target operating model and technical architecture. The fit between the project/programme’s aims and any wider departmental aims should be considered, as should the translation of policy into a delivery programme/project:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  Colour |  Criteria Description |
| Green | The project/programme scope is well defined and stable. Project/programme aims are well defined with clear Critical Success Factors (CSF). |
| Amber | The project/programme scope is unstable and attention should be given to this area. Project/programme aims are also varying/suffering from a lack of clarity and definition. |
| Red | The project/programme scope is unclear and not supported by a change control process. Project/programme aims and CSFs are not defined. |

#### Governance

This indicator considers:

* Whether the project/programme has appropriate decision making processes and structures in place with defined responsibilities;
* Whether mandates at all levels exist so there is clarity over who is responsible for what, and who accounts to whom for what;
* Whether decisions are being made at the appropriate level in accordance with mandates;
* Whether project/programme governance arrangements are evolving as the programme matures to reflect varying stakeholder requirements and emerging needs; and
* Whether project/programme governance is linked with the governance arrangements within the parent or target business.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  Colour |  Criteria Description |
| Green | An effective and clear governance structure has been implemented, which is setting direction and actively managing major project/programme issues on a regular basis. All appropriate stakeholder groups are represented within the process. |
| Amber | A governance structure has been implemented, setting direction and actively managing major project/programme issues on a regular basis. Not all stakeholder groups are represented within the structure, and or the structure is not entirely clear. |
| Red | No governance structure is in place, or the existing governance structure is ineffective, e.g. too few stakeholders are represented/poor attendance/the governance structure is unable to resolve project/programme issues. |

#### Skills and Capabilities

This indicator considers the overall level of skills and capabilities in place within the project/programme now, as well as their projected availability in the future. Specifics include:

* The skills, capabilities and experience required at the various stages of the project/programme;
* The number of people already on the team compared with those required;
* The capability of suppliers to deliver what is required to time and quality; and
* The availability of appropriate capabilities, either by direct employment or through third parties, such as consultants.

The focus of this indicator is whether the skills and capabilities are in place or not. There may be a linkage with financial resources available to secure those skills, or if there are shortages, it may be due to a lack of available skills in the overall market.

This aspect will include the skills, capacity and capability of the SRO, Programme Director, Project Manager Etc. as well as the capacity and commitment of resources that are not part of the formal project team, for example, Board members business resources and specialist resources that might be external to the project:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  Colour |  Criteria Description |
| Green | The project/programme is fully resourced, and there are no major skill gaps on any of the work streams. |
| Amber | There are shortages of skills and resources that may cause issues for the project/programme in terms of schedule or quality. |
| Red | There are significant skills shortages, or lack of resources that are impacting very significantly on project/programme schedule or delivery quality represented/poor attendance/the governance structure is unable to resolve project/programme issues. |

#### Key Processes

This indicator considers how well key project/programme processes are established including:

* Programme and project planning, progress monitoring and reporting;
* Risks and issues management;
* Benefits management;
* Communications;
* Dependency management; and
* Procurement.

Reviews should consider where the project/ programme complies with established best practice in programme and project management, while respecting the fact that the unique needs and environment of each programme/project may require individual approaches and additional custom made processes. Furthermore, the review should take into account the lifecycle stage when assessing the processes: i.e., at an earlier stage, processes may not necessarily be fully developed and implemented. The effectiveness, appropriateness and maturity of the processes should be considered, as should the existence of other programme/project assurance mechanisms.

Risk and issue management, as a process, is included in this indicator. However, the actual risks facing the project/programme can potentially fall across all and any of the indicators:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  Colour |  Criteria Description |
| Green | Processes fully established in line with best practice and being carried out with a high degree of confidence and effectiveness.  |
| Amber | Processes are only partially established and needs attention and resources to bring up to the required standard. |
| Red | Processes not established – major work is needed to set these up. |

#### Dependencies

This indicator considers:

* The major external factors upon which the project/programme depends, and over which it may have little or no ability to manage directly, for example legislation, third party activities (e.g. Trade Unions) or other major initiatives in other Government Departments; and
* The overall complexity of the project/programme in involving other agencies.

The relative priority given to the project/programme in the Department, the fit with the Department’s objectives and the support at Board and Ministerial level should be considered along with the project/programme’s approach to the management of the wider stakeholder community. This Indicator is a reflection of major risk factors impacting on the project/programme from external sources. It is fully recognised that some such external dependencies may well be not manageable by the programme:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  Colour |  Criteria Description |
| Green | All project/programme dependencies have been identified. Communication channels have been put in place to deal with any changes to plans that affect any of the dependent parties. There are no dependencies that will impact successful delivery of either this programme or a dependent programme.  |
| Amber | There are issues, which may delay, or cause material changes due to a dependency on an external party. These issues are identified and can be resolved through procedures already in place. Although the programme dependencies are identified, plans are not integrated with external parties or other dependent projects. |
| Red | External dependencies threaten successful delivery of the project/programme and there is no plan to resolve them. Project/programme dependencies have not been identified. |

#### Business Readiness to Change

This indicator considers the readiness and capability of the parent or target business to manage and support the change, ensuring any required new processes are defined, the affected parties are ready, willing and able to utilise the new processes and systems. This is essentially the ability to work the business change through the organisation(s)/system(s) to deliver the long term benefits and includes activities such as:

* The impact of changes and the risks involved have been analysed and are actively being managed;
* Any required new or changed processes have been defined or plans exist to do this;
* Stakeholders and staff are actively preparing for the transition. Business Change Plans have been built and are being executed;
* The appropriate communications and training is being provided; and
* Incentives are being provided to business staff to realise the change.

The programmes/project’s approach to all aspects of benefits management should be considered including any plans for transition management and the extent to which they include responsibility for benefits realisation and monitoring after the programme/project has closed and for embedding the programme/project outcomes in business as usual:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  Colour |  Criteria Description |
| Green | Business readiness to change has been considered, planned for, and is being actively managed by the project/programme |
| Amber | Business readiness to change has been considered, but more detailed planning is required. There is a risk to benefits if attention is not given to this area. |
| Red | There is little or no evidence of consideration of or planning for business change. There is significant risk to benefits. Immediate attention is required in this area. |

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**National Infrastructure Commission - Design Principles**

This indicator considers the degree to which the National Infrastructure Commissions four recommended design principles have been considered by and embedded into the project / programme. The NIC has since joined with the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) to form the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA).

1. Carbon emissions mitigation and adaptation to climate change;
2. People-based outcomes and community engagement;
3. Local identity and improving environment; and
4. The realisation of economic, environmental and social benefits to the population.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  Colour |  Criteria Description |
| Green | The project / programme has demonstrated that it has fully considered the principles and built them into its outcomes, plans and delivery. |
| Amber | The project / programme has demonstrated that it has considered the principles to some degree but there is little evidence that they have been built into its outcomes, plans and delivery. |
| Red | There is little or no evidence of consideration of the principles and no evidence that they have been built into its outcomes plans and delivery.  |

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## Summary of Concerns, Evidence, Recommendations and areas of good practice

### Recording risk based concerns, evidence and recommendations

The Review Team should focus on identifying and presenting any problems, issues or concerns affecting the programmes/projects deliverability, and where possible, link these to concerns about time, cost, quality, scope or benefits realisation considerations. Each risk identified should be clearly evidenced in the body of the report and therefore be objective.

Separating the risk / concern from the recommendation(s) will enable the programme/project team to focus directly on addressing the risk or area of concern. This approach will also provide a clearer focus for NISTA when conducting Assurance of Action Plan (AAP) reviews in the event of a Red SGA**.**

The Review Team is asked to record their recommendations and show the key risks and issues that they address. Recommendations should be listed in priority order of impact.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Product review**

The Review Team should be reviewing all products listed in the relevant Gate Review Workbook ahead of the Assurance Review. A list of products can be found in the ‘Project Documentation’ section of the relevant Gate Review Workbook. Where Review Teams feel that the quality of the products could be improved, or there are gaps in the project’s product set then these should be included in the Recommendations Table.

**Areas of good practice**

The Review Team should also consider what is being done well, as well as recommendations for improvements and include these in the Areas of Good Practice table within the report.

### Assigning a Classification

There are 13 classifications in the classification set, Review Teams are asked to record the classification reference number of each recommendation as per the table below.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **#** | **Classification** | **Definition** |
| 1 | Governance | Recommendations related to the oversight, structure and decision making of a project/ programme. This theme also includes recommendations relating to alignment with pan-government priorities, strategies and controls. |
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| 2 | Stakeholder Management | Recommendations related to relationships with all parties with an interest in the outcome of the project/programme, whether internal to the agency, internal to government or external. |
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| 3 | Programme and Project Management | Recommendations related to all aspects of project, programme and portfolio management, but excludes recommendations on Risk, Issues and Dependency Management (Theme 9) and Resource Management (Theme 10) |
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| 4 | Change Management & Transition | Recommendations related to the Management of Business Change – all the work required with and in the business and with the customer to make ready for the initiative, in terms of changes to business processes including: business continuity planning, changes to work processes and resourcing, changes to organisational structures and staffing to support transformational or process changes to business delivery to ensure a smooth transition to BAU It does not include Technology Readiness for Service (Theme 12). |
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| 5 | Financial Planning and Management | Recommendations related to financial planning, organising, directing and controlling of financial activities. |
| 6 | Benefits Management & Realisation | Recommendations related to the identification, ownership, measurement and realisation of benefits and dis-benefits. Benefits can be either financial or non-financial. |
| 7 | Commercial Strategy & Management | Recommendations related to the end-to-end procurement process including: Procurement strategy and planning, Approaches to the market, Contract negotiation and Contract management. |
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| 8 | Context, Aim & Scope | Recommendations that are aimed at the clarity of the change to be implemented. It covers alignment to vision, strategy and policy; the purpose, objectives, justification and description of the change; and the determination of success and the necessary environment to ensure success. |
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| 9 |  Risk, Issues & Dependency Management | Recommendations related to the identification, analysis, impact assessment, response and the on-going review and management of Risks, Issues and Dependencies (i.e. outputs that are required by a project to succeed, but which will be delivered by parties not under the direct control of the project). |
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| 10 | Resource & Skills Management  | Recommendations related to all aspects of the identification, supply, optimisation, prioritisation and maintenance of resources and appropriate skills. |
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| 11 | Knowledge Management | Recommendations related to the process of capturing, developing, sharing, and effectively using organizational knowledge. It includes sharing knowledge and experiences or Lessons Learnt. |
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| 12 | Technology | Recommendations related to all technology issues, including the alignment of the technology solution to the technology and business strategy, the integration of one or more technology solutions, the operational readiness of the solution (including testing of the solution), and all aspects of security relating to the technology solution. |
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| 13 | Other | To be used only when other classifications do not apply. |

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## Recording Blockers to Delivery

The ‘’Blockers to Delivery’ section of the Report should set out the blockers to delivery that are outside of the programme/project’s control that will severely impact time, cost, quality and scope e.g., lack of clarity around cross-government policy decisions and objectives or a lack of meaningful collaboration with key stakeholders including other departments and Devolved Administrations (DAs).

When recording these critical and high-impact Blockers the Review Team should consider what level the blocker sits at**.** Example blockers may include:

1. Lack of visibility of upstream policies;
2. Awaiting ministerial decision(s) in own department;
3. Awaiting ministerial decision(s) in OGD;
4. Inability to engage with external stakeholders e.g. industry, small and medium sized enterprises and/or citizens;
5. Difficulty in passing supporting legislation and/or Statutory Instruments (perhaps due to lack of parliamentary time);
6. Business case approval/funding unavailable;
7. Devolution settlement; and
8. Other (e.g. lack of political support).

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

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