



Undertaking Project and Programme Assurance Reviews

A Briefing Note for the SRO and Programme / Project Team

Introduction

This note provides the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) and Programme/ Project Manager (PPM) with key information about their role in a forthcoming assurance review (the Review) and outlines responsibilities and actions needed to enable full participation in a successful review.

This briefing note will not go into details about the specific type of reviews, but it is designed to provide you with information in increasing levels of details, should you require it.

This briefing note is written primarily for High Risk programme/project reviews arranged and managed by the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA). However, this briefing note can be adopted for reviews managed by departments under delegated authority. In such circumstances, the Departmental Assurance Coordinator (DAC) effectively replaces the role outlined for the NISTA Assurance Lead (AL).

The Role of the SRO and PPM in an Assurance Review	2
Requesting an Assurance Review	2
The Assessment Meeting	3
Post the Assessment Meeting, Pre Planning Meeting	3
The Planning Meeting	4
During the Assurance Review	6
Writing the Assurance Review Report	6
Confidentiality and Disclosure	8
Review Feedback	9
Summary of key actions	9
Where to find additional information	10
Acronyms	10



1. The Role of the SRO and PPM in an Assurance Review

The Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) is the person accountable for the successful outcome of the programme or project and is seen by NISTA as the primary client. It should be noted the NISTA Assurance Reviews are independent and are delivered on behalf of the Accounting Officer. The PPM is seen as the person who is responsible for the day-to-day management and control of the programme/project. They are expected, throughout the review process, to be the interface between the Review Team, the programme/project and the NISTA AL.

The Review Team Leader (RTL) will work with the PPM to arrange the planning meeting and the review itself, as well as asking for key documents to be made available before the planning meeting and before and during the actual review.

The RTL, along with the Review Team Members (RTMs), will verbally brief the SRO and provide a draft written report before disengaging from the review. The SRO will take ownership of the review report risk based recommendations and ensure that appropriate action is taken to address the recommendations. The progress and status of the recommendations will be attached to the review report of the next assurance review undertaken to enable the Cabinet Office to analyse the effectiveness of reviews and support “lessons learnt” for the Government.

It is important to note that an assurance review is not an audit and that the Review Team is there to help the programme/project succeed. It is important to acknowledge that assurance reviews are jointly owned by the department and the NISTA, or other delegated authority.

2. Requesting an Assurance Review

Integrated Assurance and Approval Plan (IAAP)

All projects and programmes on the Government’s Major Project Portfolio (GMPP) will need to complete an [Integrated Assurance and Approvals Plan \(IAAP\)](#) at the beginning of the programme/project. The IAAP should be used to plan, coordinate and provision assurance activities and approval points throughout the programme/project delivery lifecycle. The IAAP has explanatory notes for completion attached to it. *Please also refer to these notes for information on the approval process.*

NISTA will use the information in the IAAP to forecast what assurance reviews are required over the lifecycle of all projects and programmes on the GMPP, this will be known as the Assurance Review Pipeline. The NISTA AL will regularly review the Assurance Review Pipeline and they will look to schedule an assessment meeting for GMPP projects and programmes 12 to 14 weeks ahead of the assurance review date (as indicated by the IAAP).

The programme/project should use the IAAP to indicate to NISTA when an assurance review is required.

Risk Potential Assessment (RPA)

The SRO, the PPM or a designated member of the programme/project team should complete a [Risk Potential Assessment \(RPA\)](#) in order to initiate an assurance review. A new RPA is required for each



assurance review, as risk levels can change throughout the lifecycle of the programme/project delivery. The RPA has explanatory notes for completion attached to it. After **PPM/SRO** approval, the RPA should be submitted to the department's programme & project management Centre of Excellence (COE) or DAC, who will forward it to the Gate Review Helpdesk (Gateway.Helpdesk@nista.gov.uk). The appropriate AL will review the Assurance Review Pipeline and the RPA and will contact you to arrange an Assessment meeting (12 to 14 weeks ahead of the Assurance Review).

The RPA rating will generally determine whether the review is undertaken by NISTA or delegated to departments. The RPA can also be used to help the programme/project ensure areas identified as having a higher risk potential are being adequately addressed and resourced.

3. The Assessment Meeting

The Assessment Meeting will normally be attended by the PPM and the AL. The SRO may attend if deemed appropriate by the AL. The objective of the Assessment Meeting is to:

- Confirm the RPA rating;
- Obtain an overview of the programme/project's position, risks, schedule and planned approval points;
- Confirm readiness and identify scope of the review;
- Confirm the skills and experience required for the Review Team;
- Identify potential stakeholders who will be required to participate in the review; and
- Agree the timing of the assurance review and its logistics (*note: the assurance review will typically be planned 12 to 14 weeks after the Assessment Meeting*).

At the Assessment Meeting, the initial list of stakeholders to be interviewed during the review will be developed. Between the Assessment Meeting and the subsequent Planning Meeting, the programme/project will be responsible for scheduling their attendance during the review. At the Assessment Meeting the programme/project, in consultation with the AL, will be asked to consider which documentation will be needed for the review and to start to assimilate this for the Review Team.

The programme/project will be responsible for undertaking a number of administrative tasks related to the review, e.g. establishing interview schedules, room bookings, documentation preparation etc. It is advisable that the person who will be responsible for administrative support attends the Assessment Meeting.

It is expected that the vast majority of the assurance reviewers will be drawn from the pool of accredited Civil Servants, for which there is no cost to the programme/project for their time and resources. However, should an appropriate Civil Servant not be available, the AL may draw from a pool of external contractors. The cost of those contractors will be borne by the programme/project. The AL will advise the programme/project in advance of this scenario. SRO's may wish to consider including a small allocation of funds for such circumstances in their business case. The AL will advise the rates and amounts at the time, if this is required.

4. Post the Assessment Meeting, Pre Planning Meeting

After the Assessment Meeting and before the Planning Meeting (which normally takes place approximately 2 weeks before the review), the programme/project team will undertake the tasks



agreed at the Assessment Meeting e.g. book the appropriate stakeholders for the assurance review and start collating the required documentation needed for the review. It is important to note that the NISTA Resourcing team will require a minimum of 12 weeks' notice, from the Assessment Meeting, to identify a suitably experienced Review Team.

The success of the review largely depends on the detailed preparation carried out during this time and the short period after the Planning Meeting, and the review itself. To assist in preparation, guidance on the various types of assurance reviews can be found on [NISTA's Assurance Review Toolkit](#).

It is important that likely participants are given notice of forthcoming interviews as soon as the dates for the review are confirmed to:

- Ensure a consistent message is communicated to all those involved in the review, an interview briefing document is available to send to all those who will be interviewed during the review; and
- Help the PPM and the review team an interview schedule template is available to complete and make available to the Review Team at the planning stage.

Stopping the review after it has been booked may mean that an additional 12 weeks will be needed to reorganise the review. If it is stopped after a contractor has been engaged, you may be liable for costs incurred.

5. The Planning Meeting

Prior to the Planning Meeting, the RTL will contact the PPM, or the SRO, to introduce themselves and to answer any questions that the SRO/ or PPM may have. The Planning Meeting is an essential part of the review process for a number of reasons: It may be the first time members of the Review Team will have met each other, the SRO, the PPM and the programme/project team. It gives an opportunity for the Review Team to discuss how best to work together and establish a Code of Conduct (see below for details) applicable for the review, the Review Team and the SRO.

The RTL should chair the planning meeting, which is normally divided into four parts (the planning meeting should be scheduled for approx., 3 hours):

- **First session:** The Review Team initially meets with the AL to sort out the team dynamics, logistics and consider what approach they will adopt to ensure a successful review. The AL will outline the position and any concerns, if relevant.
- **Second session:** The SRO and programme/project representatives join the meeting. The SRO will provide an overview of the programme/project, outline the progress, challenges, risks and areas of concern they would like addressed during the review. This information will help the Review Team to familiarise themselves with the programme/project and identify the key potential issues to be addressed during the review. This will also enable any Terms of Reference for the review to be finalised and agreed and to identify the key stakeholders to be interviewed.
- **Third session:** The programme/project team and the Review Team finalise the interviewee list, documentation requirements and logistical matters for the review (the SRO is not required for this session).
- **Fourth session:** The programme/project team leave the meeting, and the Review Team and the AL align on the review plan and any personal logistics.



The Planning Meeting will enable the SRO to advise the Review Team of the programme/project's progress, challenges, risks and areas of concern. This information will help the Review Team to familiarise themselves with the programme/project and identify the key potential issues for the review. This will also enable any Terms of Reference for the review to be finalised and agreed.

The Planning Meeting is used to finalise the logistics for the review, interview schedules and documentation requirements and also used to answer any concerns the SRO/ PPM or the programme/project team may have. It is critical that the Review Team have access to key programme/project documents within a timeframe that allows for appropriate understanding to be gained.

As the RTL is accountable for the review, they are expected to chair the planning meeting. The AL will normally attend to facilitate or assist where necessary, provide the latest view of the programme/project from a NISTA/Cabinet Office/HMT perspective and ensure that the correct process for the review is followed.

As the SRO is accountable for the programme/project, their presence is essential so that they can give the Review Team a strategic overview of the environment the programme/project is operating within and to ensure that any concerns can be raised.

A generic [planning meeting agenda](#) is available to enable the SRO/ PPM and the RTL to arrange the sequence of the meeting. As the Planning Meeting is likely to take some hours, it would be appropriate to make refreshments available.

Code of Conduct

The [Code of Conduct](#) is a statement of principles that the Review Team will adopt to ensure that a consistent professional approach is adopted throughout the review.

The Code of Conduct should be agreed by the Review Team at the start of the Planning Meeting, written down and discussed with the SRO. Establishing a Code of Conduct is essential to ensure that the Review Team and the SRO adopt uniform working practices and standards.

Typical items in a Code of Conduct include:

- Open and honest contributions;
- Valuing diversity/difference;
- Maintaining confidentiality;
- Comments will be non-attributable;
- Robust management of time;
- Valuing best practice as well as identifying areas for improvement;
- Independence and objectivity;
- Team working;
- Learning experience;
- A commitment to providing a report that gives value to the programme/project and its stakeholders;
- Appropriate triangulation of evidence; and
- The review is a forward looking strategic review and is not an audit.



6. During the Assurance Review

Throughout the review, the Review Team will collaborate with all key stakeholders on behalf of the SRO, the client, and they should act accordingly. The review will entail a series of interviews with key stakeholders and the Review Team. In some reviews workshop sessions may be used. This will be discussed/agreed at the Planning Meeting.

The PPM / SRO will need to make themselves available at the beginning of the review for the Review Team to hear their views.

During an assurance review, it is essential that open and honest dialogue is maintained. The review is a partnership between the SRO and the Review Team to increase the programme's/project's chances of success. Being open and honest with the Review Team is key to the success of the review and the PPM and the SRO should expect the same in return.

Typically emerging findings meetings are held at the end of each day of the review. However, it is recognised that a face to face meeting every day may not be practical and should this be the case, a discussion with the RTL will be required to find an alternative solution (e.g. a telephone conversation or having a suitable deputy to stand in at the SRO's discretion). However, the SRO must be available for feedback on the final day.

Emerging finding meetings are intended to enable the Review Team to share their early thoughts with the SRO on the way the review is progressing, ensure that the SRO is kept abreast of any emerging findings, clarify any points of uncertainty and discuss any misinterpretation or correct any factual inaccuracies. They are also used to secure any additional information/evidence from the programme/project and to capture any additional matters for exploring in interview.

The PPM may be asked during the review for sight of key documents. Therefore it is vital that the processes are in place to ensure the timely provision of requested documents.

7. Writing the Assurance Review Report

The assurance review report will include a statement of the background and objectives of the programme/project, a summary of the findings, including related risk based recommendations, timing of the next assurance review, the list of interviewees, and their roles and a summary of the previous recommendations, with the current progress/status.

Stage Gate Assessment (SGA)

The Gate Review Assurance Report will include a Stage Gate Assessment with an associated Red/Amber/Green (RAG) status. The Stage Gate Assessment (DCA), which will be 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. <i>Recommendation: The programme/project is ready to proceed to the next stage.</i>



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. <i>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.</i>
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. <i>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.</i>

The Review Team will present a draft review report to the SRO before they leave the site on the final day of the review. At the presentation of the review report, the SRO may correct factual and grammatical errors but the RAG status is non-negotiable. The final review report should be delivered to the SRO within 5 working days of the review concluding.

If the programme/project receives an overall SGA RAG status of Red, and there is NISTA involvement, the AL will be advised by the RTL. All programmes/projects with a Red DCA status will be reported to the Accounting Officer (AO), HMT and other COO Civil Servants in order to proactively escalate and agree next steps.

Where a DCA is Red the Review Team should discuss with the SRO, and other appropriate stakeholders, the need for a follow up Assurance of Action Plan (AAP) review to assess progress on action to address the critical recommendations. An AAP review should occur within 8 to 10 weeks, but no longer than 12 weeks.

Summary of Concerns, Evidence and Recommendations

In the assurance review report the Review Team is asked to record the key risks or particular concerns observed by the Review Team that will severely impact deliverability of the programme/project. All recommendations should be aligned to resolution and management of these and the DCA should be based on the severity and urgency of these risks. All review team members are expected to help formulate the recommendations

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.

The Review Team should also consider what is being done well, as well as recommendations for improvements and include reference to this in the report summary.

Blockers to Delivery

In the assurance review report the Review Team is asked to record critical, high impact blockers that are outside the project/programme'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. All review team members are expected to help formulate the recommendations.

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

8. Confidentiality and Disclosure

The SRO will be responsible for ensuring that action is taken to address the agreed risk based recommendations. They are encouraged to share the assurance review report with those key stakeholders who may benefit from its findings. A copy of the report will always be sent to the NISTA/DAC. NISTA may distribute the report wider (e.g. to HMT and other areas of the Cabinet Office, such as Government Commercial Function and Government Digital Services) if appropriate. A copy of the report will also be passed to the Review Team responsible for the next review.

Any programme/project with a Red or Amber/Red DCA will be reported to the Accounting Officer (AO), and HMT and CO Officials in order to proactively escalate and agree next steps. This will be done by the PDA.

To allow the Review Team to accurately determine their assessment of progress, the Review Team will need to see all relevant documentation. The Review Team will treat all such documentation appropriately and documents should not be withheld from the Review Team as that may restrict their ability to fairly assess the programme/project. The Review Team is required to spend time reading



appropriate documents before the actual review begins, so the documents must be available in time and in an appropriate format that is compliant with security and clearance needs. Any documentation provided to the Review Team is done so on the basis that it will be treated in complete confidence. It is important to note that the amount of time the Review Team has available to read any documentation is limited. As a consequence, the programme/project team are encouraged to consider carefully what documents are provided.

Documentation is only used for the purposes of the assurance review and the Review Team is required by NISTA to dispose of the review report and any supporting documents no later than 5 working days after the delivery of the final assurance review report.

Please note that assurance reports are subject to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. In the unlikely event of the RTL or other parties being asked to respond to an FOI request, please contact NISTA as soon as possible before action is taken. Should a report be released under FOI, any names of the Review Team will be redacted.

9. Review Feedback

The SRO is required to complete an SRO Feedback Form which asks for feedback on various aspects of the review. Completed Feedback Forms should be returned to the Gate Review Helpdesk (Gateway.Helpdesk@nista.gov.uk), as the comments are an important way of ensuring that Best Practice is maintained and that the NISTA learns from your experiences. Please note that the feedback process is an open process and reviewers are entitled to see the feedback form.

10. Summary of key actions

The SRO will need to:

- Attend, or nominate someone to attend, an Assessment Meeting to ensure the appropriate assurance review is identified, resourced and scheduled;
- Attend the Planning Meeting - be prepared to discuss the programme/project status and issues and the scope of the review;
- Discuss their personal view of the programme/project at the start of the review;
- Ensure they (or a designated member of the Programme/Project Team) are available during the review to discuss emerging findings;
- Receive the review report at the end of the review; and
- Complete the review feedback form and return it to the Gate Review Helpdesk (Gateway.Helpdesk@nista.gov.uk).

The PPM will need to:

- Ensure that the SRO attends, or nominates someone to attend an Assessment Meeting to ensure the appropriate assurance review is undertaken;
- Agree the dates for the Planning Meeting and the review and arrange the venue and necessary facilities;
- Familiarise themselves with the appropriate guidance for the relevant assurance review;
- Discuss with the RTL what documentation is needed before the assurance review;
- Agree the Planning Meeting agenda with the RTL;
- Attend the planning meeting with the SRO;



- Brief the Review Team at the Planning Meeting on the status of the programme/project and agree the logistics of the review;
- Ensure that all those to be interviewed are briefed on the purpose of the review and what is expected of them;
- Discuss your personal views of the programme/project at the beginning of the review;
- Ensure the documentation listed in the appropriate assurance review guidance is available during the assurance review;
- Arrange the logistics of the review, ensuring availability of interviewees as required by the Review Team;
- Ensure the SRO is available to discuss emerging findings during the review (or, if not, ensure a suitable deputy is available);
- Ensure the SRO is available at the end of the review to receive the review report; and
- Ensure the SRO completes the review SRO feedback form and returns it to the Gate Review Helpdesk (Gateway.Helpdesk@nista.gov.uk).

11. Where to find additional information

More information can be found in the following sources:

- [National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority web pages.](#)
- [Assurance toolkit \(includes guidance on the various types of assurance reviews and the Gate Workbooks which should be used to inform every review.](#)
- Gate Review Helpdesk: Gateway.Helpdesk@nista.gov.uk
- [Embedded Documents: A reminder that all documents referenced in this briefing note are available here.](#)

12. Acronyms

Acronyms used throughout this document include:

- **PPM:** Programme/Project Manager
- **RPA:** Risk Potential Assessment
- **IAAP:** Integrated Assurance and Approval Plan (IAAP)
- **NISTA:** National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority
- **AL:** NISTA Assurance Lead
- **RTR:** Review Team Resourcer
- **RTL:** Review Team Leader
- **RTM:** Review Team Member
- **SRO:** Senior Responsible Owner
- **PPM COE:** Programme & Project management Centre of Excellence
- **DAC:** Departmental Assurance Coordinator
- **PDA:** NISTA Project Delivery Advisor