

ASSURING DELIVERY OF PUBLIC SECTOR CHANGE PROGRAMMES

Delivering change across the public sector has never been more important or difficult. It is characterised by increased urgency, rapid adoption of digital technologies, agile methods and legacy and data systems that are no longer fit for purpose.

When you combine this with the headlines about failed change programmes and the ubiquitous change issues faced by all public and private sector organisations, then surely change assurance should be highly valued and in great demand?

WHY IS PROGRAMME ASSURANCE SO IMPORTANT?

Done well, change assurance can be described as ‘providing the benefit of hindsight before something bad happens’. That’s why it is an important tool in the Steering Committee’s and SRO’s kit bag to ensure that critical public sector change programmes are set-up for success and remain on track to deliver the intended benefits and outcomes for Government and citizens.

An independent perspective on the change programme, whether delivered from a different part of Government or by an external partner, is essential to ensure that the programme is:

- Aligned with, and driving towards, the agreed benefits and outcomes
- On-time and within budget
- Engaging stakeholders across Government at the right level
- Resourced appropriately with seamless internal and third-party teams
- On top of the key risks and issues
- Delivering a product that can and will be used by Government departments, public sector bodies or citizens.

This may sound like motherhood and apple pie, but these are just some of the areas, which if not managed correctly, cause change programmes to fail. And that’s when there’s a risk that lots of public money is spent on rework and recovery, Government ministers and officials get frustrated with progress and ultimately, and programmes don’t deliver the benefits or outcomes intended.

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WHAT DRIVES THE NEED FOR ASSURANCE?

The need for assurance is not specific to the public sector and the decision to undertake independent delivery assurance review for a key change programme will usually be driven by three common concerns that the Steering Committee or SRO will have.

These are:

- The change is something that is inherently high risk, or that the public sector has struggled with before – this concern usually occurs in advance, during the mobilisation of a complex, high-risk programme, and is often prompted by prior awareness, experience, insight, or advice.
- The delivery KPIs on the change programme are drifting out of tolerance – assurance can provide insight into the things that need to be done to ‘course correct’.
- A double-check is required – experienced Government officials or civil servant may feel things are ‘not quite right’, and want another opinion, perhaps on a specific area of focus before things go drastically off track.

Irrespective of the reason behind the assurance activity – it is important that it is set-up and managed in an appropriate way.

HOW TO APPROACH ASSURANCE IN THE RIGHT WAY?

Assurance of complex change programmes can sometimes be thought of as a negative activity, with outsiders snooping around a programme team that is too busy to waste time and explaining everything from scratch. It is important that leaders across Government departments and public sector bodies create an environment where the approach to assurance is:

- Non-prescriptive, focussing on what matters most each time, not box-ticking.
- Conducted at the right level, deep enough to be evidence-based, but not turning over every stone unnecessarily.
- As short as possible, by focussing on what matters most and using effective, experienced reviewers; and,
- Most of all, collaborative – the value must come from the departments and organisations involved agreeing to take necessary additional actions. Ideally, insight should be shared during the review activity, not just presented as a ‘dumped’ final report.

Assurance should be seen as helping delivery, not as a threat to the individuals leading and engaged in that delivery. Whilst portfolios across Government and the wider public sector will be different, the thought process for identifying what might need assurance, deciding on how to structure that assurance, and the approach to assurance, should be similar.

DO YOU NEED CHANGE EXPERTISE?

At Project One, we help and support our public sector customers to assure the most critical change programmes. Our team of change experts have years of experience and work with Government departments and public sector bodies to provide independent change support through every step of their change journey.

If you would like to discuss your specific challenges and our public sector experience to see how we can help, please get in touch with John.howarth@projectone.com.