Programme Assurance

To provide a practical perspective on programme assurance and demonstrate how it can add value to your organization

What we will discuss together in our session today

- **Programme Management**
  - **What is Programme Management and how does it work?**
  - **How do Programme and Project Management differ?**

- **Programme Assurance**
  - **What does Programme Assurance look like in practice?**
  - **What value does it bring to an organization?**

Programme Management methodology – origins

Project management methodologies emerged in the mid 1970s, primarily designed to support IT projects.

Practice evolved over two decades, the PRINCE2™ project management methodology was established in the mid 1990s and soon became the 'internationally recognised defacto project management standard'.

A suite of project, programme and portfolio management methodologies were developed over the next two decades, driven by the UK Government Treasury, Cabinet Office and Office of Government Commerce. Managing Successful Programmes™ is one of these methodologies.

An independent assurance framework called Gateway™ Review was established, as part of this suite, and introduced by the UK Government across high value, high risk transformational programmes around the year 2000/2001. It continues today.

Much of the suite of products, including the Gateway™ Review process, was adopted by the governments of, amongst others, New Zealand and Australia later in that decade and continues to be deployed there today.

Infrastructure and Projects Authority: assurance review toolkit - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
Gateway reviews (treasury.govt.nz)
Guidance on the Assurance Reviews Process (RMG 106) | Department of Finance

Programme Management methodology – origins

The respective Auditors General (or equivalent) for each country have published assessments of the process and its benefits – more on that later.

The Gateway^{TM} Review process has evolved to take account of changes in approach and emerging methodologies with the development of the Technical Assurance Framework for significant IT infrastructure and architecture changes, in addition to responding to more recent approaches such as Agile.

Majority ownership of the suite of methodologies passed from the UK Government to Axelos in a commercial agreement in around 2013.

I have no affiliation to Axelos. Definitions used in this talk are sourced from Axelos products.

Other institutions, methodologies and qualifications exist, such as the Project Management Institute (PMI), the Project Management Professional (PMP) qualification and the Association for Project Management (APM) with the Body of Knowledge (BOK) qualification but these will not be referenced in detail by me in this talk.

I hold practitioner qualifications in PRINCE2^{TM}, Managing Successful Programmes^{TM} and Management of Portfolios^{TM} in addition to being a member of the cohort of the UK and Scottish Governments' Gateway^{TM} Review Team Leads.

How do projects and programmes differ?

A project has a specific, measurable timebound objective and usually results in the creation of a thing that people can see, use or otherwise interact with – for example, the refurbishment of an office, the replacement of obsolete computer hardware or the introduction of a new system for recording staff annual leave.

Project example - The Canadian Thanksgiving Dinner or Summer Solstice Festival Feast project…

✓ We know what it looks like because we've seen it before or we can look at a picture or description of what we are creating. We have the 'end in mind'.

✓ There is a due date, a timeline, there is a plan and things need to happen in a set sequence.

✓ Resources and equipment are in place. We have a cook, a refrigerator and an oven.

✓ There are risks to be mitigated; electricity, gas and water supplies are secured and charges may have been paid to ensure reliable service provision. Maintenance contracts may be in place.

✓ Stakeholder expectations are understood.

✓ Known suppliers and sources of food are identified and lists written. Funding is secured. Shopping is done. Produce is assembled.

✓ Different ingredients are prepared differently and cooked in different ways for different lengths of time. There are predecessor and successor activities but all have a single focus on the purpose of creating the meal.

✓ The project manager keeps everything on track, slows things down and speeds things up and tells stakeholders when the meal is ready to eat. A meal is successfully served.

The Canadian Thanksgiving Dinner or Summer Solstice Festival Feast project…

Out of project scope: the provision of drinks, accommodation, travel and entertainment.

The scope of the project is to produce the food. Planning a whole Thanksgiving or Summer Solstice Festival weekend, might be a programme.

How do projects and programmes differ?

A **programme** is defined as a temporary flexible organization created to coordinate, direct and oversee the implementation of a set of related projects and activities in order to deliver outcomes and benefits related to the strategic objectives of the organization.

How do projects and programmes differ?

A programme begins with a vision of a future state. That vision is 'a postcard from the future' describing what it feels like to exist in that future state.

Developing the vision together with other stakeholders allows the future state to be visualised and for the parties concerned to identify the multiple different parts that will need to come together to realise that future state.

What a Programme may look like…

In a health and social care context, for example, a programme may be established to 'improve the health outcomes for children in Ottawa by age 8'.

Such a programme would then require a well developed vision statement that may include for example, having ready access to earlier pre-school care, the creation of outdoor and indoor leisure spaces, a better mix of food outlets, better access to dentistry and medical facilities, better access to cultural activities, improved housing, reduced air pollution, better schooling, better food provided at school, free school meals for all children etc.

Responsibility for each of these improvements may lie with a different unitary authority, or provincial, regional or national body. Road building and improvements to housing ordinarily bear no connection to infant dentistry or school meals but they all deliver the future state – improved health outcomes.

A properly constituted programme would fully develop the vision of the future state. This would detail and describe all of the things required and outline how they will be resourced, built, operationalized and co-ordinated. Multiple different inputs are drawn together to create an outcome, the new future state that is greater than the sum of its parts. This is a programme.

An example of a Programme Vision

"The National Wallace Monument sets the standard for cultural heritage attractions.

Taking pride of place in the integrated heritage, culture and tourism offering that makes Stirling a must-visit destination. Our dynamic visitor experiences attract international, national and local visitors all year-round, returning time and again to discover new ways to enjoy and explore this world class visitor attraction.

Working together with key tourism and economic development partners and our local communities, we have been bold and ambitious, embracing new technology and creative ideas to develop a quality interpretation of this heritage site that evolves and grows to retain visitors and captivate new markets.

Cultural heritage, tourism, sustainability and safety are well balanced, with the creation of prosperous inclusive growth opportunities for our local communities through the provision of high quality locally sourced produce in our on-site gift shop and catering outlet."

What is Programme Assurance?

Independent programme assurance is an enabling function, independent of and external to the programme.

It provides reassurance to those not necessarily immersed in the day-to-day detail of the programme, or aspects of it, that there is appropriate oversight and scrutiny and that appropriate checks and balances have been applied.

Auditor General Canada – 2018

"While the Deputy Minister was accountable for what happened on his watch, his staff didn't give him the information he needed to understand the serious project risks, there was no independent project oversight."

"Openness and a 'show not tell' environment are essential principles of effective programme assurance."

"For all government-wide information technology projects, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat should
- *a) carry out mandatory independent reviews of the project's key decisions to proceed or not…"*

"It's the own goals, the incomprehensible and avoidable failures that touch so many people and take so long and waste so much money to fix, that have to be stopped."

Programme Assurance

In a Managing Successful Programmes™ context, assurance is not only an external or independent activity. Assurance management is a programme governance function with the purpose of ensuring that all management aspects of the programme are working appropriately and that the programme stays on target to achieve its objectives.

**How assurance is defined in Managing Successful Programmes™ methodology:**
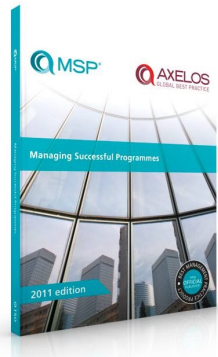
"The systematic set of actions necessary to provide confidence to the senior responsible owner and stakeholders that the programme remains under control and on track to deliver and that it is aligned with the organization's objectives."

Managing Successful Programmes 4th Edition

"A discipline that provides transparency and confidence to the sponsoring group that the programme will meet its objectives by focusing activities on the most risky aspects of the programme."

Managing Successful Programmes 5th Edition
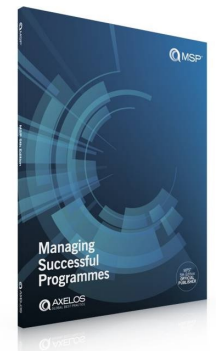
Independent Programme Assurance

Independent assurance is given by independent assurance providers, who do not form part of the programme itself and by definition this is assurance that is wholly independently led, and external to the programme.

The Senior Responsible Officer / Programme Sponsor is accountable for ensuring that provision for this assurance activity is planned into the lifecycle of the programme in accordance with the requirements of organizational policy (Directives, Standards or other guidance) and in response to the requirements of higher decision-making authorities within the investing organization.

Those delivering independent external assurance are responsible for the development and deployment of this external assurance activity.

Independent Programme Assurance – when does it happen?

A programme or investing organization may seek independent assurance of programme progress, or of a proposed way forward at specified trigger points:

- ✓ At the different stages of the development cycle of the Business Case
- ✓ At key planned decision points, for example a funding release or other investment decision
- ✓ By undertaking a strategic assessment in response to a change in circumstances e.g. a change of government or a global pandemic
- ✓ By undertaking an independent assessment of the delivery strategy
- ✓ By undertaking an independent assessment of readiness for service
- ✓ By undertaking a post implementation review of operations and benefits realization.

Key decision or trigger points would vary subject to the type, complexity and duration of the programme, but are largely predictable and can be planned for.

Programme Assurance
– what does it look like in practice?

In practice, a programme would arrive at one of the agreed specified trigger points mentioned earlier.

Whether this is a key decision point or change, the programme would make their case to progress through that decision point (often referred to as 'gating') or make the case for their Change Request, stating their readiness and outlining their preparedness for the key decision point or change in question.

The programme would then seek to have that case independently assured by an independent assurance provider.

The independent assurance provider would then undertake their review and prepare an Independent Assurance Review Report.

Programme Assurance
– what does it look like in practice?

The programme has no authority to revise the findings of the independent assurance review but have the opportunity to vary their proposal in response to any recommendations made or advice given in the Independent Assurance Review Report.

The Programme case is then presented by the programme to the higher authority and is accompanied by the full, unedited Independent Assurance Review Report.

The assurance review should not be seen as a challenge to the Programme proposal, rather as a considered validation of it.

The higher decision-making authority then have the opportunity to consider the programme proposal, together with the Independent Assurance Review Report, and the programme response to it, and to make an informed decision.

Programme Assurance
– what does it look like in practice?

Employment and Social Development Canada, for example, have in place well developed Directives and Standards on Programme Management and Programme Assurance.

When an independent assurance review is commissioned at one of the agreed specified trigger points mentioned earlier, a Review Team is assembled. The review team typically consists of a Review Team Leader and two Review Team Members.

All are independent of the programme to be assured.

The Review Team Leader will have extensive experience usually in senior management roles and, in the delivery of significant change programmes and, be an accredited reviewer with significant experience in undertaking reviews of significant change initiatives and programmes.

Programme Assurance
– what does it look like in practice?

Review Team members will have experience in the delivery of significant change programmes and either be, or be working towards accreditation as a reviewer. They will have, or be developing significant experience in undertaking reviews of significant change initiatives and programmes.

Review Team members are drawn from programme or project management practitioners operating within the organization.

The Review Team Leader guides the Review Team, who decide based on experience, what programme documents to review and which personnel to speak with as a part of the review. There should be no adverse impact on programme delivery timescales because the Programme Plan will have accounted for the anticipated review at the agreed specified trigger points mentioned earlier. No new or additional documents or processes are required to be produced by the programme for the purpose of the review.

Programme Assurance
– what does it look like in practice?

All information is corroborated and triangulated with other information from a separate source, prior to being considered for inclusion in the report findings.

The review is scheduled over 5 consecutive working days. Individual face-to-face engagement with (typically) up to 14 programme and other staff (identified by the Review Team) takes place on days 1-3.

These 45 minute discussions are confidential and information gathered in these sessions in never attributed to the source.

The maximum time commitment for the review by any individual in the Programme Team will be 45 minutes.

Programme Assurance
– what does it look like in practice?

The Senior Responsible Officer / Programme Sponsor has the opportunity to receive a face-to-face briefing from the Review Team at the end of days 1-3, at which the Review Team will share and discuss any emerging findings.

Based upon their operational, delivery and review experience of the likely causes of failure or contributors to success, the Review Team draws together the findings of the document reviews and discussions with staff, to develop an evidence based assessment of the programme. This assessment is presented as the Independent Assurance Review Report.

The report is drafted on day 4 of the review and a draft shared with Senior Responsible Officer / Programme Sponsor on day 5, to be checked for factual accuracy. The final report is published on day 6.

Programme Assurance
– what does it look like in practice?

The report will include a Delivery Confidence Assessment together with any recommendations for improvement and acknowledgements of good practice.

The Delivery Confidence Assessment will be categorized as follow:

RAG (Red/Amber/Green)	Criteria Description
Green	Successful delivery of the programme to time, cost and quality appears highly likely and there are no major outstanding issues that at this stage appear to threaten delivery significantly.
Amber/Green	Successful delivery appears probable, however, constant attention will be needed to ensure risks do not materialise into major issues threatening delivery.
Amber	Successful delivery 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.
Amber/Red	Successful delivery of the programme is in doubt with major risks or issues apparent in a number of key areas. Urgent action is needed to ensure these are addressed, and whether resolution is feasible.
Red	Successful delivery of the programme appears to be unachievable. There are major issues on programme definition, schedule, budget required quality or benefits delivery, which at this stage do not appear to be manageable or resolvable. The programme may need re-baselining and/or overall viability re-assessed.

Programme Assurance
– what does it look like in practice?

Recommendations will be categorized as Critical, Essential or Recommended as follows:

Level	Description
Critical	Critical for immediate action, i.e., to progress through the gate the programme should take this action immediately
Essential	This should be attended to before the gate, or the programme will receive a conditional approval.
Recommended	Potential improvements but not critical to progress through the Gate but is likely to have an impact on the successful delivery of the programme.

Auditor General Canada - 2018

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UK National Audit Office - June 2010

"Independent assurance is valued by stakeholders and, while difficult to quantify, there is strong evidence that such assurance has been beneficial to individual projects.

We estimate that the total cost to government of assurance for high risk projects is £8.3 million which is minimal compared to the £10.5 billion of annual expenditure on the 42 projects tracked within the Major Projects Portfolio (MPP).

If assurance helps prevent just one of government's high risk projects from a serious cost overrun, the size of the potential saving more than justifies the investment."

NAO report: Assurance for high risk projects

Australian National Audit Office Auditor-General - 2012

"Based on the feedback provided by agency SROs, there is a high level of satisfaction with the quality of the review teams that are undertaking Gateway reviews.

In addition, the significant majority of SROs have reported to Finance that they find Gateway reviews beneficial and consider that the recommendations made in the Gateway report will enable them to achieve improvements in project outcomes.

That said, it is common for agencies to not fully implement Review recommendations in a timely manner."

[201112 Audit Report No 22.pdf (anao.gov.au)](#)

Controller and Auditor General of New Zealand - 2016

"In my view, Gateway reviews have delivered benefits to individual projects and programmes. Project sponsors have reported that they find Gateway reviews beneficial. My staff saw specific examples where a Gateway review had provided advice that helped a project reach an important milestone."

"For many projects and programmes, specific benefits, including cost savings, are harder to identify. There are many other influences on the success of projects and programmes, and the impact of Gateway reviews can be difficult to isolate.

A cost-benefit analysis of Gateway reviews in the United Kingdom found that projects that had reviews experienced cost savings of 2-4% of the total project costs. This type of analysis is very complex and has not been replicated in New Zealand."

Auditor-General's overview — Office of the Auditor-General New Zealand (oag.parliament.nz)

UK National Audit Office - June 2010

"Over the past decade the introduction of independent assurance such as the Gateway™ process… has improved significantly the control environment around high risk projects.

We support this achievement while noting the impact of constraints on how assurance currently operates, most notably the lack of a clearly stated and enforceable mandate."

"The introduction of Gateway reviews in 2001… has been a significant improvement to assurance for high risk projects"

NAO report: Assurance for high risk projects

Computer Weekly - 2007

"Gateway reviews have been proven to help high-risk projects that hit trouble and are willing to take advice.

But for government project managers that choose to stick their heads in the sand and avoid the scrutiny, IT project failures can remain hidden from view until it is too late."

Do gateway reviews produce results? (computerweekly.com)

Programme Assurance in ESDC

In alignment with Treasury Board Secretariat guidance, the Chief Financial Officer Branch at ESDC have established a workable approach to programme management.

This approach is centered upon industry best practice and directed through the development, approval and implementation of an ESDC Directive and Standard on Programme Management.

As detailed in our talk today, Programme Assurance is a key part of our approach, and we have also developed, approved and implemented a Directive on Programme Assurance.

Rocky Balboa

Programme Assurance in ESDC

Rocky Balboa

In establishing these new concepts and we have developed, learned and modified our approach to ensure integration with existing organizational governance and to encourage improvements in delivery confidence.

Being an Independent Review Team Lead requires a skill set that is still relatively rare in the Government of Canada.

As outlined, these processes have been operational in United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia for more than a decade.

These countries operate a series of procurement frameworks to source and access Review Team Leads.

Review Team members can be drawn from the programme or project management community within the host organization; this facilitates knowledge transfer.

Programme Assurance in ESDC

New concepts can often raise concerns, and trepidation and make colleagues apprehensive.

We have worked hard to appropriately engage with our clients.

- Data Foundations Programme

- Human Resources Service Branch Modernization Programme

We have developed a high trust relationship with our clients who have quickly understood and appreciate that assurance is not about policing and checkpoints and unwelcome scrutiny but is about support, engagement, learning and improving the chances of successful outcomes.

Rocky Balboa

Programme Assurance – final thoughts

Integrated assurance is an enabling function, whether internal to a programme, or independent of and external to the programme.

Openness and a 'show not tell' environment are essential principles of effective programme assurance.

Only true external independent assurance affords the appropriate level of visibility to external decision makers.

Independent assurance is not a question of trust or of doubting the commitment or capability of a programme team, it is simply about key decision makers receiving independent reassurance that the right things are being done at the right times.

How much assurance is enough, and how independent that assurance has to be to give the necessary reassurance, is realistically an organizational governance decision.