HEA | An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas
The Higher Education Authority

Bulletin No.3

Governance of Significant Projects: Learning from Sector Experience

Governance of Significant Projects: Learning from Sector Experience in ICT, Digital Transformation and Other Major Projects

This bulletin builds on the HEA letter of 25 September 2026 to the sector on the governance of significant ICT and other projects and programmes.

The HEA thanks colleagues across the sector who shared practical learning from major projects undertaken by their institutions. This bulletin draws together the main points from that engagement and relevant project-review evidence and explains their relevance to institutional assurance. It supports reflection on governance practice rather than prescribing a single approach.

Each institution remains accountable for effective governance, stewardship of public funds, risk management, delivery of intended outcomes and corrective action where delivery moves materially away from what was approved.

1. Governance oversight and accountability

Major projects need clear governance from the outset, with defined roles, accountability, reporting and decision-making. Executive accountability for delivery should be explicit and sustained, while governing bodies, committees, sponsors and steering groups should have clearly documented oversight, challenge, escalation and decision-making roles appropriate to the project. These documented reporting, escalation and decision-making routes are referred to below as governance channels. Important decisions should be recorded.

Project classification is a key governance control. It means categorising a project by reference to its financial scale, technical and integration complexity, organisational impact and the consequences of failure to achieve intended outcomes. Institutions should distinguish routine projects from complex or significant programmes when they begin and review the classification as risks change. Classification should determine the level of senior oversight, the depth and frequency of reporting, escalation triggers,

decision-making authority and the need for early independent assurance.

2. Information for Governing Body oversight

Effective oversight depends on written reports for the Governing Body that build a clear picture of the project over time and are open about emerging risks. Dashboards should show both the project's current position and the direction in which it is moving. Relevant early warning indicators may include design and integration readiness, adequate staffing, go-live preparedness, dependency risks and difficulties with suppliers. Trend analysis and cumulative risk tracking can help decisionmakers identify deterioration before any single indicator turns red.

3. Change control and changes in direction

Major projects may require changes during delivery. Formal classification should be reviewed as risk evolves, and significant changes should pass through proportionate stage gates, readiness criteria and approval checkpoints. **Where viability or a material departure is in question, the matter should trigger timely consideration and a documented decision through the appropriate governance channel.** The reasons for the decision, its effects and any changes in direction or mitigating actions should be recorded and communicated.

Before approving a proposed change, institutions should consider whether it remains aligned with the project's approved objectives and whether its effects on scope, cost, timetable, risk, expected benefits and contractual obligations are understood.

Large digital-transformation programmes can carry the same, and in some cases higher, risks as major complex capital projects. Unlike capital projects delivered against an agreed design and planning framework, the route to achieving a digital programme's intended outcomes, and what is ultimately feasible, may be less clearly defined at the outset. Risks may include complex integration, delivery that does not follow a predictable path, dependence on suppliers, significant organisational change, poor delivery and substantial cost overruns. Treating these programmes mainly as operational IT initiatives, rather than as the complex projects they are, may lead to their governance and financial risks being understated.

Governance arrangements should therefore include clear and regular oversight by the Governing Body, proportionate to the programme's scale, complexity, strategic importance and risk. They should also

include proportionate stage gates, measures of design maturity, readiness checks, checks that resources are adequate and formal approval points.

4. Corrective action and recovery

When a project is in difficulty, the institution should apply the reporting principles described in **section 2** to establish a written, evidence-based picture of the project's current position, how it has changed over time and its prospects for recovery. This should draw on available project records and other reliable evidence, including trend analysis and cumulative risk information where these exist. Any gaps or weaknesses in the available information should be identified and addressed as part of the corrective action. Concerns about the project's viability should be escalated through clear, time-bound routes that lead to formal action by the institution.

The institution should consider proportionate options to recover the project, remedy the problem, change the delivery approach, or exit, supported by suitable evidence. The chosen action should be approved and recorded. Progress and any further deterioration should be reported through the appropriate governance channels.

Corrective actions should have clear owners and deadlines and should be monitored until complete. Material departures from what was approved should be reported promptly to the Governing Body or relevant committee, and, if necessary, notified to the HEA under the Oversight Agreement.

5. Institutional capability and specialist expertise

Institutions need enough internal project-management capability[1] and access to suitable specialist expertise to understand project information, retain ownership of decisions and challenge delivery and the assurances provided by internal teams, suppliers and advisers. Skills and training are needed at executive, programme and oversight levels. **External or independent experts can provide a more objective view where gaps in capability, over-optimism or complex contracts make the true position difficult to see. However, reliance on internal or external assurance does not remove the institution's responsibility to satisfy itself as to the project's position and risks or its accountability for delivery.** Training can help governing bodies, senior executives and project sponsors understand their

[1] See also Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, Better Public Services: Project Management Resources, https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-public-expenditure-infrastructure-public-service-reform-and-digitalisation/publications/better-public-services-project-management-resources/.

responsibilities and challenge delivery effectively.

Access to technical, commercial, legal and other specialist advice can help an institution understand its position, test assumptions and challenge advisers, suppliers and delivery partners while retaining responsibility for decisions.

Independent assurance is most valuable when introduced early enough to inform decisions. Institutions should identify clear triggers for seeking it, including delays, repeated revisions to the project baseline, resourcing gaps, contractual complexity and material governance concerns.

6. Procurement and contract-management risk

When external parties are central to delivery, contracts and delivery arrangements should be fit for purpose and operate effectively in practice. **Institutions should maintain active oversight of supplier capability, responsibilities, performance, change requests, testing and remediation. Contractual protections, remedies and escalation arrangements should be clear to all parties and usable in practice.** Processes for resolving material problems should also be defined. Workarounds and contingency arrangements should be understood and monitored through the appropriate governance channels.

External suppliers do not remove the institution's accountability for oversight. Institutions should address weaknesses in supplier performance or delivery using the contractual protections, remedies and governance arrangements described above.

7. Financial control and value for money

Institutions should ensure that project spending supports approved objectives, meets public expenditure requirements[2] and reflects value-for-money considerations[3]. Assumptions about costs over the project's full life should inform these assessments. **The Governing Body should receive timely information when costs, delivery assumptions, financial exposure or expected benefits change materially.** This allows the implications to be assessed and appropriate decisions to be taken through the relevant governance channels

[2] Infrastructure Guidelines
[3] Value For Money Framework

8. Culture, escalation and communication

Staff should be able to raise concerns early without fearing that reporting a difficulty will be seen as a failure or that raising legitimate concerns will lead to adverse consequences. Leaders should support open, evidence-based reporting. Concerns raised should be properly assessed and responded to. Formal reports should give an honest account of delivery, emerging risks and changes in direction. **Escalation routes should be clear and time-bound, and concerns raised through them should lead to timely executive decisions.** Clear ownership by senior management and open communication about decisions, mitigating actions and changes in direction help maintain trust and support timely action.

9. Sector collaboration and shared learning

Institutions may benefit from working together on common requirements, data models, processes and lessons learned. Sector collaboration could strengthen procurement and implementation while allowing for institutional differences. Existing sector channels could be used to share experience, identify common issues and determine whether wider action is required. Institutions should also be encouraged to engage directly with one another at an early stage so that practical experience and lessons learned can inform project planning, oversight and corrective action in a timely manner.

10. Key takeaways and areas for consideration

Governance arrangements will differ according to each project's purpose, expenditure, strategic importance, scale, complexity and risk. Each institution and its Governing Body should satisfy themselves that the institution's arrangements operate effectively in practice and provide sufficient evidence of accountability and oversight throughout the project lifecycle. In doing so, the following areas may support consideration by institutions:

- Are roles, responsibilities, decision-making powers and routes for raising concerns clear from the start? Where they are not, are gaps resolved, documented and communicated, with corrective action taken where delivery has been affected?
- Do the Governing Body and relevant committees receive timely and complete information on progress, costs, timelines, risks, dependencies, expected benefits and emerging issues?
- Are important decisions recorded, and are proportionate stage gates, contingency plans and assurance arrangements in place and used when needed?
- Before a significant change is made, are its effects on scope, cost, timetable, risk, expected benefits and contractual obligations assessed, approved at the right level, recorded and communicated?

- If a project is in difficulty, is its position established by applying the reporting principles in **section 2**, are gaps in the available information addressed, are recovery or exit options considered, and are corrective actions approved, assigned, monitored and reported?
- Does the institution have enough project-management capability and access to suitable technical, commercial, legal and other specialist advice to understand and challenge delivery and the assurances provided?
- Do governing bodies, executives and sponsors understand their oversight roles, and does the Governing Body provide effective challenge?
- Are contracts and delivery arrangements fit for purpose, clearly understood by all parties, actively overseen and supported by clear protections, escalation routes, remediation duties and contingency arrangements? Where weaknesses are identified, are they assessed, corrected and monitored through the appropriate governance channels?
- If a project's financial exposure, payment structure, commercial leverage or viability changes materially, is this identified through cumulative reporting and escalated promptly to the appropriate authority?
- Can staff raise concerns early and without fear, and do formal reports reflect what is happening in practice?
- Where reviews, audits, assurance work or project experience identify concerns, do those concerns result in a formal institutional response and continue to be monitored through relevant governance reporting?

End

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