

Outcome delivery plans

The case for keeping and improving the government's performance framework



About this report

New governments often scrap the performance framework of their predecessor. This report sets out why the new government would be wise to retain outcome delivery plans (ODPs) and provides recommendations on how the ODP framework can be strengthened.

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Summary

Liz Truss's government has just two years to achieve its priorities before the next general election. The new cabinet will face immediate pressure to show the real-world impact it is having on the problems facing the UK, from the cost of living crisis to the climate emergency. Ministers will need to keep a tight grip on implementation across government, understand the difference decisions are making and change tack where required.

Truss has made plain her aims in government – “we will deliver, we will deliver, we will deliver”.¹ It is useful, then, that the previous administration made several improvements to the way performance is tracked and affected across government. Enacting the principles of the Public Value Framework,² a small number of four-year ‘priority outcomes’ were agreed and then updated for each department at the 2020 and 2021 spending reviews.³ Departments set annual outcome delivery plans (ODPs) to explain how they would achieve those outcomes with the resources allocated to them, and agreed how their performance would be measured.⁴ Departments’ progress towards those outcomes is reported regularly to the centre of government – No.10, the Cabinet Office and Treasury – in a process intended to provide a single view of government performance and enable more effective evaluation.

Reports that Truss's government intends to hold a spending review in December leaves the prime minister, chancellor and minister for the Cabinet Office little time to decide whether to retain the current performance framework, tied as it is to the spending review process, or, as new governments often choose to do, scrap it and start afresh.

Disbanding the ODP framework would be a mistake. It is one of the most useful tools at the new prime minister's disposal to guide delivery – changing or removing it would weaken her and her government's ability to oversee and affect progress towards her goals. The prime minister should view the framework as a means by which she can oversee performance across government and hold her ministers, and the civil service, to account. Ministers should use the framework as support for their leadership of departments. It stands to improve the evaluation of policies before, during and after implementation. And in turn it can help the government to spend public money more efficiently, learning from what works to secure as much value as possible.

This paper, based on interviews with more than two dozen people, reviews the performance framework and makes the case for the new government to keep it in place. A single view of government performance shared by departments and the centre of government in No.10, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury is necessary for good government. It provides the prime minister with a lever of accountability to manage her cabinet. It provides a means to oversee delivery and change approach where the government is off course. Priority outcomes are helping to bring financial and public service performance closer together. They encourage performance discussions to be rooted in real-world impact and they can enable better long-term planning.

For their part, ODPs have begun to improve the oversight of performance at the centre of government. They have started to recognise the cross-cutting and complex nature of most policy problems. And they have the potential to improve the evaluation of policy and, in doing so, make government more efficient.

There was not universal support for the ODP framework among ministers in the last administration. While some used it effectively, others did not and its future was in jeopardy. The target to reduce the civil service headcount by 91,000 roles by 2025 further hindered its use, with departments overturning previously agreed plans – arguing with some justification that they had set their outcome targets before knowing they would be working with staffs up to 20–40% smaller to meet them. As a result, the most recent round of ODPs, expected to be released this summer, were yet to be published by the time Truss succeeded Boris Johnson in No.10.

Staff reductions appear to apply to the centre, too, and Truss's intention to install a 'slimmed down' No.10 operation and a less interventionist centre of government raises the question over the future of teams focused on implementation and performance analysis.⁵

The performance framework is not perfect. It could be substantially strengthened. ODPs could better recognise the complexity of policy systems, set relevant targets and metrics, better explain departments' roles in achieving outcomes, and define how work will be co-ordinated and performance evaluated.* They should be devised with greater input from the front line, experts and people with lived experience. Cross-cutting outcomes should be co-ordinated more consistently across government. And the framework needs to be much more transparent to allow outside input and scrutiny.

But consistency is key. The new approach was unfamiliar in 2020 and most departments did not see its relevance. This is slowly starting to change, especially since the 2021 spending review. Despite a lack of interest from some ministers, and in some cases active attempts to frustrate the framework, more departments are now engaging with the process. And ODPs are a marked improvement on their more narrow predecessor, the single departmental plan. The longer the framework survives, the greater its potential to influence performance.

This was a point that Truss herself, in her earlier role as chief secretary to the Treasury, acknowledged in the foreword to the 2019 Public Value Framework. She noted that "to be effective it needs to be embedded in daily routines and processes across the public sector... such that the expectation becomes that departments will work together and with the Treasury to continuously improve their performance against the framework, and with it the value they deliver for taxpayers".⁶

* For definitions of the terminology used to describe different aspects of government performance, see the Glossary at the end of this report.

Lastly, the performance framework will be much more powerful with greater ministerial and prime ministerial attention. If ministers dedicate time and focus to it, they will discover its value. As such, they would do well to break the cycle of new governments dismantling the performance framework of their predecessors. Truss has clearly prioritised delivery and her government will be judged on that: retaining and improving a working system will help her meet her aims far better than attempting to start over.

Recommendations in brief

The new government should keep the existing performance framework and improve it in the following ways:

The centre of government should champion the framework

- The prime minister and chancellor should require ministers to use the framework as a tool for normal departmental planning and cross-government co-ordination.
- The Cabinet Office and Treasury should continue to share ownership and management of the performance framework.

ODPs' content should be refined

- ODPs' 'outcome strategies' should include a description of the system in which each outcome will be achieved, and the role of Whitehall departments, other parts of the public, private and social sectors, as well as external factors that might affect performance.
- Every outcome should be measured using a combination of relevant input, output and outcome metrics, as well as narrative reporting as relevant. No outcome should be agreed without a clear definition of success.
- Each outcome should include an estimated breakdown of resource by budgets and workforce, at project and programme level wherever possible.
- Outcome evaluation plans should be made more comprehensive, explaining how each aspect of work contributing to an outcome will be evaluated, when and by whom.
- Some differences in the structure of ODPs and the process through which performance is reported between departments should be allowed, to reflect departments' varied remits

Planning, co-ordination and reporting should be developed

- Outcomes should be set with greater input from the front line, experts and citizens in the run-up to future spending reviews – deliberating over their remit, targets, delivery and evaluation plans.
- The Cabinet Office and Treasury should develop and circulate expected standards for the co-ordination of cross-cutting outcomes between departments.

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- The prime minister should use the reports as the basis of regular stocktake meetings with secretaries of state and senior officials, as a means of tracking key priorities and holding departments accountable for their implementation.
 - The government should use the framework to continue to develop a single view of performance that aligns different sets of metrics, avoids duplication, is relevant to front-line services and arm's length bodies (ALBs), and over time becomes as automated as possible.

ODPs should be more transparent

- The internal versions of ODPs should be published. If government opts not to take this approach immediately it should, at the very least, include targets, trajectories and milestones in the published versions. All remaining sets of core targets, priorities and similar should likewise be published, such as the prime minister's separate list of top priorities.*
- Quarterly performance dashboards for all departments should be published in an open, interactive form.
- The government should elaborate on its description of the performance framework to explain what information is reported to which part of government, when and for what purpose.

* Sometimes referred to internally as the 'Top 35 and 200', this is another part of the government's performance framework, which tracks the delivery of the prime minister's top priorities. It is not formally acknowledged in the government's description of its planning and performance framework.

Why the new government should keep ODPs

The New Labour, coalition and 2015 Conservative majority governments each chose to dismantle their predecessor's system and start afresh (see Box 1). And there were some benefits in doing so – it allowed those governments to put their own stamp on the performance process and ensure what they saw as important was included.

But any performance framework needs time to bed into government. Given that time, their benefit to ministers and departments tends to grow, whereas starting from scratch brings inevitable disruption and unfamiliarity, and inhibits long-term planning. ODPs are only two years old – the first plans were signed off at the 2020 spending review and updated in 2021 – and while not perfect are a marked improvement on what came before. They have already started to improve performance oversight and, critically, they have potential to improve yet further. This chapter explains the merits of the current system.

Box 1 Performance frameworks, 1980s to present

1980s: Next Steps, New Public Management and the adoption of KPIs

The first Next Steps agencies were created in 1988, and with them came key performance indicators (KPIs) to oversee their work.⁷ This was in line with the Thatcher government's adoption of New Public Management techniques, which included a focus on the close management and measurement of public services.⁸

1998–2010: Public Service Agreements (PSAs)

Introduced as a way to track specific public service priorities, PSAs were initially aligned to five of New Labour's pre-election pledges.⁹ The system was further developed over its 12 years of existence, with the number of targets reducing from 600 to 160, the agreements made more consistent between departments and increasingly cross-cutting. PSAs were linked to the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit and the prime minister's priority objectives after their introduction in 2001.¹⁰ They were scrapped by the incoming coalition government in 2010.¹¹

2010s: Input and impact indicators and single departmental plans (SDPs)

To replace PSAs, the coalition installed a range of 'input and impact indicators' in departments' business plans.¹² In 2015 the Conservative majority government replaced these with SDPs, intended to bring financial, service and operational performance information together in one plan, to better support efficiency and reprioritisation.¹³ SDPs were to include measures that brought together inputs (such as budgets) and output activity.

2017–19: Public Value Framework

In 2017 the Treasury published a report by Sir Michael Barber recommending the government implement a new Public Value Framework* as a way to maximise the social value harnessed by public spending.¹⁴ After Treasury pilots, a revised framework with additional guidance was published in 2019.¹⁵ The framework emphasised the importance of measuring outcomes, and their role within wider theories of change alongside targets, delivery chains and methods for monitoring delivery.

2020–present: Priority outcomes and ODPs

Provisional priority outcomes were agreed for each department at the 2020 spending review and updated at the 2021 spending review. These were intended to capture long-term objectives such as improving educational attainment or achieving net zero carbon emissions, and framed in terms of real-world outcomes rather than administrative inputs or outputs. In 2021 each department agreed its first annual outcome delivery plan, designed to describe their plans for progressing towards those outcomes over the next year, and how their performance would be measured.

Priority outcomes and ODPs were a response to the Public Value Framework but they were also a reaction against problems with their SDP predecessors. SDPs were overly focused on inputs (such as budgets and staff numbers) and outputs (such as number of appointments, opening hours or waiting times), at the expense of real-world outcomes (such as educational attainment, crime or life expectancy). An effective performance framework needs a combination of all three measures to understand the difference government policy is making, alongside other factors outside government's control. Despite SDPs' intended purpose of co-ordinating cross-cutting outcomes, they did not sufficiently help to broker cross-Whitehall activity. Nor did they achieve their aim of effectively integrating financial management in HM Treasury with the wider oversight of government performance in No.10 and the Cabinet Office. This meant SDPs fell short of becoming a tool departments used for day-to-day planning – instead they tended to be written and forgotten.

These were the three problems ODPs were created to address. Each priority outcome was to include measures that would demonstrate impact. Outcomes were to be agreed alongside spending reviews and delivered across their four-year lifespan. And the whole system, including the quarterly reporting between departments and the centre of government, was to be jointly owned by the Cabinet Office, HM Treasury and No.10.

* The framework consisted of four 'pillars': pursuing goals – goals and plans to monitor delivery; managing inputs – basic financial management; engaging citizens and users – to guide delivery and make the case for spending; developing system capacity – stewardship of government systems.

Priority outcomes help to root government planning in terms of real-world impact

The priority outcomes and supporting measures in ODPs, in most cases, manage to address the neglect of real-world impact by single departmental plans (SDPs). For example, the 2018 Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) SDP contained six objectives. One was focused on societal outcomes, to “keep people healthy and support economic productivity and sustainable public services”, and measured with healthy life expectancy, childhood obesity and employment rates of people with disabilities.¹⁶ But the other five were more inward-looking, focusing mostly on changes to services, the workforce and the department itself.*

The DHSC 2021–22 ODP focused far more on real-world outcomes. Each of its five priority outcomes were framed in terms of impact on people, and measured with at least some metrics indicating that impact, such as the one-year cancer survival rate, inequality in disability-free life expectancy, and staff engagement rates.¹⁷

The promotion of societal impact should improve government planning and performance analysis in at least two ways. It provides a means by which departments can link and monitor their plans between the short, medium and long term. By including a combination of input, output and outcome measures departments can better plan and understand the difference work in the short term will make to services in the medium term, and to outcomes in the long term. For example, the Police Uplift programme and budgets described in the Home Office’s ODP are expected to increase police numbers, which is expected to reduce the rate of neighbourhood crime.

The focus on societal impacts should also continue to build the evidence base at the government’s disposal, which can be used in the allocation of Whitehall budgets in spending reviews. In the 2021 spending review the Treasury required departments to structure their spending bids around an explanation of how they would support which outcomes, and an estimate of the expected impact of their bids on the metrics.¹⁸ Interviewees reflected that this improved the quality of evidence used in departmental spending bids, and helped Treasury spending teams to assess and compare those bids. In turn it had the potential to improve the quality of evidence and advice available to ministers in spending review negotiations (although whether ministers engaged with that evidence during those deliberations remains unclear).

A single view of performance is necessary for good government

One objective of the ODP framework was to create, as interviewees described it, “a single version of the truth” on government performance. Quarterly reporting to the centre on progress towards outcomes would fuel dashboards shared by No.10, the Treasury, the Cabinet Office and departments. And they would bring together data from separate performance regimes, such as the No.10 Delivery Unit’s ‘missions’, the government major projects portfolio, the prime minister’s separate list of top priorities, and regular financial and HR reporting.

* They were to: reform primary, community and social care; support the NHS and secure the right workforce; support research and innovation; ensure accountability to Parliament; and promote commercial best practice.

This is not only sensible but critical for good government. A single view of performance provides shared insight around which departments can collaborate. It provides ministers with a way to track delivery across government, spot when their priorities are off track and work more effectively with their ministerial colleagues. It helps to identify overlapping and duplicating demands for information from the centre, easing the requirements on departments' reporting. And once performance data is collated in one place in a consistent form, it becomes easier to automate collation and, ideally, publish – improving transparency.

For example, the most immediate task the new prime minister faces is tackling the cost of living crisis. This is a complex problem that requires many departments to contribute to the UK's response, not to mention partners outside central government. No.10 should be able to collaborate with departments on different aspects of the response over the autumn, and then capture that planning and define success in refreshed outcomes as part of the winter spending review. The performance framework will then be a tool Truss can use to monitor the implementation of those policies, whether by the Treasury, BEIS, DLUHC, HMRC or elsewhere, and a means by which the impact of those policies can be analysed. With the necessary political will, the lessons learned from one department can be shared across Whitehall and barriers to implementation can be identified and overcome. Each of these tasks will be made easier by a single view of performance.

We heard that quarterly dashboards of departments' submissions in particular are already improving oversight. Knowing where up-to-date performance data can be found, and linking those reports with other categories of performance reports, such as major projects and programmes, is improving the potential for evaluation. The function is in its infancy. It remains manual; reporting for different parts of the dashboards remains unnecessarily separate and overlapping, for example between the priority outcomes and the PM's separate list of top priorities, and the dashboards are not used as well as they could be by departments. But this is the right approach and should be built on.

It is correct to tie outcomes to spending reviews

Previous performance frameworks were undermined by their separation from the budget allocation and financial management regimes of the Treasury (and, as a result, its lack of interest). The move to agree the current set of priority outcomes as part of the 2020 spending review with the Treasury was done to correct for that mistake. They were then updated during the 2021 spending review, and the outcomes' metric targets are intended to be achieved over the four-year lifespan of the review.

Departmental civil servants told us that setting priority outcomes at spending reviews, and linking them to the spending review's medium-term timescales, was a sensible step that made the performance framework more useful for several reasons.

Most policy problems departments target in their priority outcomes are not those that can be fixed in one year but are better suited to the multi-year timelines of spending reviews. Take the Department for Transport's priority outcomes to "improve connectivity across the UK and grow the economy by enhancing the transport network" and "tackle climate change and improve air quality by decarbonising transport".¹⁹ These are long-term outcomes that rely on large-scale infrastructure projects and whose impact will only be truly visible, in the form of connectivity or reduced carbon emissions respectively, in many years' time. Progress towards implementing specific strategies or on particular projects can be analysed on an annual basis, but progress towards the outcomes themselves is clearer over the medium- and long-term horizon that spending reviews afford.

Linking priority outcomes to spending reviews should also prevent departments and the centre trying to renegotiate them on an annual basis – which is both time and resource intensive. In an ideal world, this would mean that outcomes were not renegotiated until the next spending review, currently planned for 2024/25. But this has not worked out in practice over recent years. The 2020 spending review at which the outcomes were first agreed was an interim one-year spending review in response to the Covid crisis. And Truss has committed to a new spending review, potentially as early as December 2022, to reflect the changing approach to tax and public spending she intends for government.

Departments and the centre of government will be best served by agreeing budgets, and plans for those budgets, at the same time. Allowing departments to tweak their plans through annual updates to their ODPs is also sensible, as is publishing those plans following the Treasury's annual 'main estimates', through which departments' annual budgets are amended from the levels set at the previous spending review.²⁰ This allows departments to reflect changes to their budgets in their ODPs and, ideally, vice versa, without fundamentally changing the longer-term outcomes – only in extreme circumstances, such as the pandemic, should this be done between multi-year spending reviews.

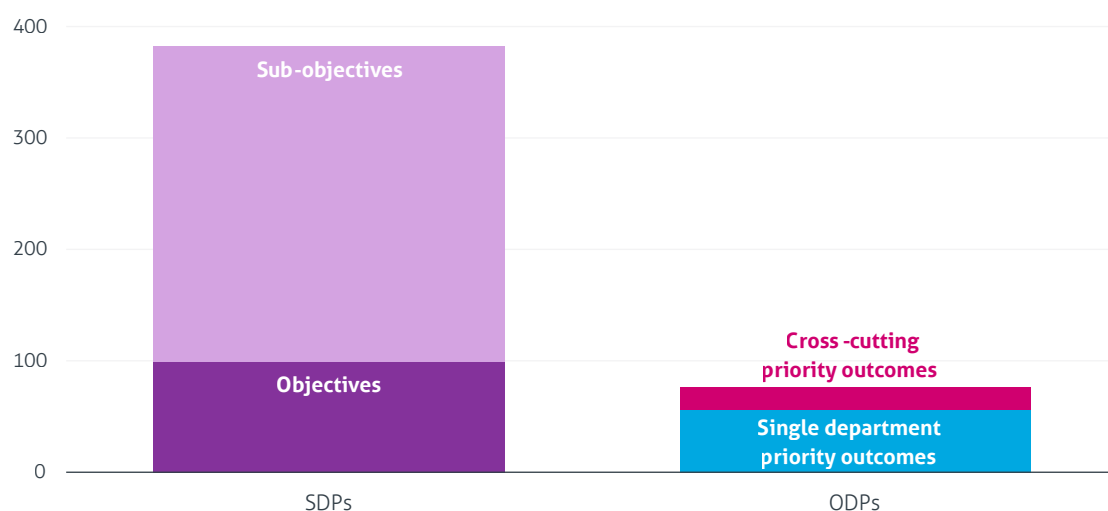
This does not stop ministers from devising and announcing new policies, in line with their priority outcomes, in the intervening time. But it would improve the chances that new policies will contribute to long-term objectives and that the government will be able to point to concrete achievements at the next election. The new government will inevitably have some new priorities but it should maintain this broad approach.

The biggest problems facing government are cross-departmental

The most difficult problems the UK government faces do not neatly fall within the remit of a single department. Whether addressing the energy and cost of living crisis, achieving net zero, reducing poverty, regional inequality or crime, or increasing economic growth and productivity – all are collective efforts to which many departments, not to mention other parts of the public, private and social sectors, must contribute.

ODPs and priority outcomes begin to recognise that reality by containing 20 'cross-cutting' outcomes led by one department but shared by several, representing 26% of the total outcomes, as shown in Figure 1 below.²¹ To take one example, the Home Office leads the priority outcome to reduce crime, but it names six other core Whitehall departments that are contributing to the same outcome and states, admittedly at a high level, the role each of those departments should play; DHSC reducing health vulnerabilities associated with offending, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) providing employment support to individuals at risk of involvement in crime, and similar.²²

Figure 1 **Number of objectives, SDPs (2019) and ODPs (2021)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Gov.uk, Single departmental plans, 2019, and HM Treasury, Spending review 2021: Priority outcomes and metrics, 2021. This chart shows the updated priority outcomes published alongside the 2021 spending review in place of the priority outcomes published in the original outcome delivery plans earlier in that year.

The approach was subsequently mirrored in the previous administration's levelling up white paper, which set 12 levelling up 'missions' to which various parts of central, devolved and local government, as well as other sectors, would need to contribute. These were objectives for 2030 such as: "pay, employment and productivity will have risen in every area of the UK" and "the number of primary school children achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths will have significantly increased".²³

Planning and tackling cross-cutting issues has long been a problem for UK governments. Ministers in the Cabinet Office, including the prime minister, consistently find the centre's ability to address these issues wanting.²⁴ As described below, cross-cutting priority outcomes are not yet bringing significant improvement to planning between departments. Co-ordination is inconsistent and too many departments still see their cross-cutting outcomes as a 'nice to have', but are often the first to be dropped once budgets are restrained.

But the central role of cross-cutting outcomes within the existing performance framework is encouraging. In some policy areas this has already led to better co-ordination between departments, for example through new director general-level working groups. No.10, the Cabinet Office and Treasury can now use such outcomes to set standards they expect departments to meet in planning cross-cutting issues, support the Economic and Domestic Affairs Secretariat and Delivery Unit's role in brokering policy, and follow up on delivery.

Evaluation plans are a welcome inclusion that can make government more efficient

Each priority outcome in the published ODPs features an 'outcome evaluation plan' in which the department can outline how it intends to evaluate the impact of the work underneath that outcome and progress towards the targets.

As described below, the published versions of ODPs feature insufficient detail under the outcome evaluation plans. DWP's evaluation plan for its outcome to "maximise employment across the country to aid economic recovery following COVID-19", for example, comprises an assurance of the department's "track record" when it comes to evaluation and a promise to develop a plan as part of future work.²⁵ Across most departments, published evaluation plans are not yet comprehensive enough to demonstrate how they intend to evaluate overall progress towards the outcome in question, rather than individual projects and programmes. Nonetheless, we have heard that the evaluation plans in internal versions of the ODPs are more detailed.

During the leadership campaign Liz Truss made clear her intention to run a "more efficient" government and declare a "war on Whitehall waste".²⁶ Efficiency relies on robust evaluation of policies before, during and after implementation. So the inclusion of evaluation plans for each outcome is a welcome development that should prove useful to the new administration. It was sensible that the Evaluation Task Force (ETF)* was involved in scrutinising, feeding back on and ultimately signing off evaluation plans in departments' ODPs. The ETF should have a similar scrutiny role in the development of future rounds of priority outcomes ahead of spending reviews, and in making sure departments enact their evaluation plans to good effect. Ensuring programmes of work are being evaluated robustly in the context of their contribution to priority outcomes is a sensible way for ministers to approach making Whitehall more efficient.

* The government created the Evaluation Task Force, a joint Cabinet Office and Treasury unit with the aim of driving "continuous improvements in the way government programmes are evaluated in order to inform decisions on whether they should be continued, expanded, modified or stopped", following the 2020 spending review. ETF advises departments on best practice, encouraging and challenging departments to uphold high standards of evaluation and transparency as described in the Magenta book.

Consistency is key to an effective performance framework

The performance framework is still in its infancy but departments are becoming more familiar with it, its purpose and potential. Its value to government will increase. Now would be a bad time to rip up the framework and start again.

Interviewees reflected that early on there was limited negotiation over the content of priority outcomes – departments felt “done to”. There was also limited thought given to how the outcomes would be achieved, what targets would be sensible and how progress would be measured. This was partly because the 2020 spending review was an interim, one-year measure during the acute phase of the pandemic. But it was a different story during the 2021 spending review, not least as departments saw more use in the priority outcomes set to the four-year timeframe of the spending review.

They also reported having a greater say in agreeing the outcomes themselves (even if some changes from the centre were unexplained), and that more thought was given to how the outcomes would be achieved – even if too much of this came when planning ODPs *after* the spending review, rather than before the outcomes were agreed.

The system is bedding in. The more it does, the more government can make better use of it. And in practice, the new government’s other priorities make this a bad moment to disband the existing framework. Truss has committed to a new spending review, likely in December.²⁷ If her government agrees that the performance framework should continue to be linked to public spending, which is already proving beneficial, it would leave itself with little time to design and implement a new framework before that spending review. Instead, it should update priority outcomes in line with the new spending review and use the remaining time before the general election to focus on making as much progress towards them as possible.

How the new government can improve the ODP framework

Priority outcomes and ODPs are an improvement on what came before and should be kept. But that does not mean ministers and officials can afford to be complacent. The framework is far from perfect and there are practical changes that would make it more useful to the Truss government.

In fact, one of the reasons to retain the current framework is that it will help the new government to deliver on its priorities. The government will gain far more from focusing efforts on strengthening performance over time, by learning from what works, than from starting afresh.

The remainder of this paper describes changes the government should make to the ODP framework that would improve its value for ministers, the civil service and the public.

Plans need to be grounded in robust theories of change that recognise complexity *

At the heart of an effective government performance framework are departments' explanations of how their outcomes will be achieved, known as a 'theory of change'. This should be the core purpose of ODPs.

Ideally, ODPs would enable departments to answer the following questions, taking the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) as a case study.

Box 2 MoJ's intended outcome to improve safety in prisons

- **What is the department's goal or intended outcome?** The MoJ's aim is to improve the safety and security of prisons.
- **How can that outcome be defined and measured?** For example, reducing the rates of assaults and self-harm among prisoners by an agreed percentage over a period of time.
- **What trajectories and milestones must be met in the short term to achieve the outcome in the long term?** For example, the delivery of the Next Generation Prison Reform programme and the funding and implementation of the Offender Management in Custody model, with linked trajectories to monitor the reduction of rates of assaults.

* For definitions of the terminology used to describe different aspects of government performance, see the Glossary at the end of this report.

- **How does the department believe it can contribute to achieving the outcomes by using its resources (inputs) to affect its work (outputs)?** For example, what difference it estimates infrastructure project budgets (inputs) and service reform programmes (outputs) will have on assault rates in prisons and why.
- **What is the role of the department, other actors in the system and other factors that will influence the outcome?** For example, the role of MoJ in overseeing prisons, the role of police forces in the wider justice system and voluntary sector organisations who work with prisoners and their families.
- **How will progress be evaluated and reported? How will this affect changes to the government's approach?** For example, which MoJ teams are responsible for collating data on prison safety, where is that data reported and how is it used to inform evaluations of the overall priority outcome?

But this is an unrealistically simple conception of performance. The reality is much messier. Public policy and services exist within complex systems, and Whitehall departments are only one actor alongside other parts of the public, private and social sectors, and the public – all affected by wider cultural, economic and demographic forces. Outcomes emerge in different and often unpredictable ways. In the MoJ example, prison safety is not in the sole gift of the MoJ but is affected by other factors – from drug abuse in prisons and inmates' mental health to the overall size of the prison population, which is itself affected by rates of crime, poverty and inequality.

This means government planners should resist the long-held temptation to see a straight line between inputs, outputs and outcomes.

As proponents of a more systemic approach to performance management have argued, "too often, those who hold power – and resource – attempt to dilute these complexities".²⁸ This also leads departments to overestimate their own control over outcomes. In turn, this can incentivise centralising, 'command and control' approaches where more decentralised approaches would have been better. During the pandemic, for instance, the decision to establish a centralised contact tracing programme in late May 2020 was driven in part by the mistaken belief that a national function would be able to implement a high level of contact tracing quickly without relying on the long-developed skills and experience of local contact tracing in council public health teams. The government reversed this decision in August 2020 and sought more involvement from local government – but that mistake could have been avoided.²⁹

But this does not mean detailed planning in ODPs is futile. ODPs should describe departments' roles as stewards within their wider networks, or 'delivery chains', and help them recognise the role and influence of other actors and factors in those systems. It remains important for them to explain their plan for their own contribution to priority outcomes, why they believe their activity will make a difference, and how they plan to evaluate their work.

In many cases, departments will, quite reasonably, not fully understand the systems in which they are seeking to deliver outcomes. Which is why, as discussed below, it is so important that ODPs are set with greater input from the front-line, experts and citizens.

Published ODPs are currently limited. They neither adequately recognise complexity or sufficiently explain departments' plans for how they intend to achieve their priority outcomes. But there are several practical changes that could be made to future rounds of ODPs that would make them more useful.

ODPs should include a mixture of input, output and outcome targets and measures

Public ODPs include nearly no targets, trajectories or milestones. While it is welcome that departments have included publicly available metrics by which performance can be judged, the lack of targets means that, in most cases, it is extremely difficult to judge whether or not the government is on track to achieve its outcomes. Targets are often misused and sometimes do more harm than good; for example, by incentivising gaming in public service provision and the creation of unpredicted perverse incentives.³⁰ But, if planned well, targets can improve performance. The lack of targets weakens the hand of anyone outside government looking to hold departments accountable for their work.

Nearly every department has put forward defined metrics by which performance on each priority outcome can be measured. The metrics chosen bring a welcome focus on real-world outcomes to most ODPs. But few departments ensure that a balanced combination of inputs, outputs and outcomes are used to demonstrate the relationship between government activity and results – or the relationship between the short, medium and long term.

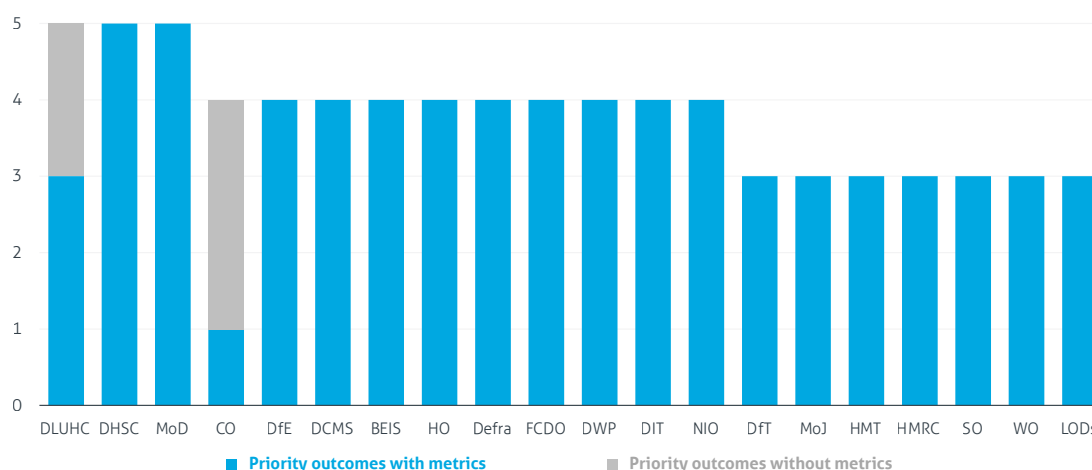
For instance, the then Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government ODP (since replaced with one for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) included the priority outcome to “raise productivity and empower places so that everyone across the country can benefit from levelling up”.³¹ The only performance metric listed under this outcome is the “economic performance of functional economic areas relative to their trend growth rates”. This is one of various sensible metrics with which this outcome could be measured, but alone it does not help the department or those interested to understand the difference policies or projects are making in the short, medium and long term. It does not, for example, include input measures on the delivery of budgets described in the ODP such as the Levelling Up Fund or UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Nor does it include output metrics on the progress in establishing the eight new freeports pledged, or ways to monitor the delivery of the DWP's Plan for Jobs.

- **Priority outcomes should include a relevant group of specific metrics, and targets where appropriate, for inputs, outputs and outcomes wherever possible. These should track the short, medium and long term.**

The absence of useful metrics in the Cabinet Office’s ODP is more extreme. The 2021 spending review specified four priority outcomes for the department. Only one – increasing the efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of government through modernising and reforming the work of the government functions – includes any metrics by which performance can be measured.

The other three outcomes state that “the department will provide narrative reporting on progress”.³² This is used even where progress is eminently measurable, such as the aim to “advance equality of opportunity across the UK”. It is understandable that some outcomes will rely on a combination of defined measures and narrative reporting, but unnecessarily vague objectives will make it harder for the centre of government and the public to hold departments to account. Every outcome should include at least one definition of success.

Figure 2 **Number of priority outcomes with and without metrics by department, 27 October 2021**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of HM Treasury, Spending review 2021: Priority outcomes and metrics, 2021. This chart shows the updated priority outcomes published alongside the 2021 spending review in place of the priority outcomes published in the original outcome delivery plans earlier that year. It shows only the priority outcomes that each department is leading on, not those which they are supporting.

ODPs should include more detail on the role of other organisations and resource allocation

The ‘outcome strategy’ sections of most ODPs are used to describe the problem being addressed and, in many cases, explain the areas and programmes on which departments will focus. The Department for Education’s (DfE) ODP, for example, follows each priority outcome with a ‘vision’ for that outcome, and a small number of priority areas on which the department will focus, such as technical and higher education, apprenticeships, funding schemes, and more.³³

However, while these are often supplemented with information about what other departments will contribute to the outcome, ODPs do not describe the role other actors in the system will play in sufficient detail. The DWP’s priority outcome to “maximise employment across the country to aid economic recovery following COVID-19”, for example, describes some of the programmes that DfE, BEIS, the then

MHCLG and the Treasury will contribute to progress towards this objective.³⁴ But it does not describe the role that local government plays in supporting people into work, the role of the wider health and social care system in supporting the public health of the working population, or the role of the social sector. Nor does it recognise the ways in which wider factors such as education and inequality might affect the outcome. Wider, more detailed descriptions of the systems in which these problems exist and the roles different partners play would improve the quality of the outcome strategies.

Some departments have begun to use ODPs to break down their resource allocation by priority outcome. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), for instance, details an RDEL and CDEL budgetary breakdown and an FTE workforce breakdown*, for each of its priority outcomes.³⁵ This is useful because it helps those scrutinising the department's plans to understand the relationship between its inputs and outputs.

But not all departments have taken this approach. HMRC has instead stated at a headline level its budget allocation and that it had, at the time of publishing, a total workforce of 58,170 FTE, before explaining that "HMRC's departmental finance systems are not structured to report costs and resources by priority outcome".³⁶ This makes understanding the link between inputs and outputs impossible to understand.

- **It is a useful exercise for departments to map resources against outcomes, even where it is not neatly aligned, and that breakdown should be included in all future rounds of ODPs.** Even those departments that have already included a headline breakdown should go further, signposting to detailed information which explains which parts of their administration – and budgets – are deployed on what programmes and outcomes.

ODPs should include more detailed evaluation plans

Outcome evaluation plans are a welcome inclusion in ODPs but need to be more comprehensive – and published. Current plans feature little detail. Most departments have included a small number of relevant evaluation plans they will follow to judge the impact of particular projects or programmes within an outcome. There is, in most cases, no attempt to explain how the department will judge this within the broader evaluation of the overall outcome, who will monitor which metrics, when and how.

DCMS's outcome, to "grow and evolve our sectors domestically and globally, in particular those affected by COVID-19, including culture, sport, civil society, and the creative industries", for example, describes 14 projects and programmes that will contribute to that outcome.³⁷ These include the Tourism Recovery Plan, Sport Recovery Package and the Contestable Fund. It goes on to detail various metrics that will be

* This refers to Resource Departmental Expenditure Limits and Capital Departmental Expenditure Limits. DEL is the budget that departments can spend on services, including staff. Within that, resource spending is money that is spent on day-to-day resources and administration costs. Capital spending is money that is spent on investment and things that will create growth in the future, www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-understand-public-sector-spending/how-to-understand-public-sector-spending. FTE is the full-time equivalent number of staff an organisation has.

used to judge performance. But the evaluation plan for that outcome lists just two evaluation programmes, planned for the Commonwealth Games and the Cultural Investment Fund, before promising that other evaluations will be developed.

- **Future ODPs should include more comprehensive evaluation plans that continue to describe particular programme evaluations, and also explain how these will be used to understand progress towards the overarching priority outcome.**

The performance framework should be much more transparent

We have heard some of the above problems are in part answered by the more detailed, internal versions of ODPs. These reportedly contain targets and trajectories, more detailed resource breakdowns and more comprehensive evaluation plans. But they are not publicly available, and the government refused to share even redacted versions with the Institute for Government for this project. The public versions do not yet include enough information for those outside government to properly scrutinise departments' progress.

The description of the planning and performance framework states that it is designed to support "the government's aim for transparency".³⁸ The Declaration on Government Reform – a 2021 government plan that sets out proposals on how to improve its own operation – asserted that the government should be "open and transparent in the way it works".³⁹ These are the right aims but, in its current form, the performance framework falls far short of government's ambitions for transparency. And its value would be significantly improved if the framework and its practice were opened up.

It is helpful that all metrics included in ODPs are drawn from publicly available datasets, and that the plans include live links to those datasets. It is also welcome that departments have started to include summaries of performance against those measures in their annual reports and accounts.⁴⁰ And it is useful that plans describe the major projects and programmes of work that sit under each priority outcome, to begin to demonstrate their approach to these.

Yet that is the extent of the framework's transparency. Too much remains unnecessarily secret. There are two versions of every ODP. As noted the public versions are light on detail, while the quarterly performance dashboards describing departments' progress towards their outcomes and performance against the measures are not publicly available at all. The very existence of the prime minister's separate list of top priorities, another part of the performance framework, has not been formally acknowledged and is absent from the government's description of its planning and performance framework. And little information is available about how departments report progress through the performance framework, beyond brief asides in a small number of guidance documents and a speech given by the cabinet secretary.^{41,42,43}

Greater openness is justified on the grounds that transparency is integral to the effective use of public money. It is one of the principles expected of all public services set out in the Treasury's guidance for managing public money, which specifies that departments should "make available timely information about their

services, standards and performance”.⁴⁴ Publishing more detail of departments’ plans and performance against those plans would make government more accountable to the public.

Most importantly, more transparency would increase the value government can draw from its performance framework. Opening up detailed plans and performance analysis would help experts outside government to contribute to the government’s evaluation and analysis. Limiting input only to civil servants (and often a small group of civil servants in departments’ corporate centres) restricts the breadth of insight available to leaders and will weaken subsequent analysis.

Take net zero. BEIS’s priority outcome to “reduce UK greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050”⁴⁵ is a cross-cutting outcome supported by at least four other departments, but in truth it is a whole-country mission that takes in every sector of the UK’s economy and society. The department’s planning and evaluation would be improved if the performance framework were open to input and scrutiny by climate experts outside government. The framework is right to recognise that most of the outcomes are long-term objectives shared across society. Greater transparency would better enable the collaboration those kinds of objectives require.

There is no reason for the government not to publish the internal, more detailed versions of ODPs, except where doing so could endanger national security. Departments might decide to continue to publish shorter, summary versions alongside more detailed plans to aid the reader. But government should commit to publishing more detailed plans wherever possible.

- **Detailed published plans should include any future version of the prime minister’s separate list of top priorities** – if the prime minister sets a series of priorities, the public deserve to know what they are.
- **The Cabinet Office and Treasury should also publish interactive versions of the quarterly performance dashboards** for all departments and outcomes, so that there is an up-to-date, central view of the government’s performance available to the public at all times.
- **And the government should elaborate on its description of the reporting processes** that support the performance framework to explain when and how departments submit information, and how that data is used to improve performance.⁴⁶

If ministers and senior officials opt not to take this more transparent approach immediately, at the very least they should commit to including more detail in the public versions of future ODPs. Including targets, trajectories and more detailed evaluation plans would be a useful next step to better explain the approach departments have taken to their priority outcomes. The full benefits to performance will come only with full transparency.

Outcomes should be set with greater input from the front line, experts and citizens

The 2020 outcomes were agreed with input from a relatively small group of people at the centre of Whitehall departments. There was little, if any, engagement of expert opinions outside departments, of the front line of public services who would be responsible for delivering particular work, or of people with lived experience of the issues under consideration.

Open policy making would improve the relevance of future outcomes. Take, for instance, the Home Office's outcome to "tackle illegal migration, remove those with no right to be here and protect the vulnerable".⁴⁷ This is a cross-cutting outcome shared with the Cabinet Office, FCDO and MoJ. But asylum and immigration is a policy area closely guarded by the Home Office. A gap between its policy making and the front line has proven a problem for the Home Office in the past, including in the development of the 'hostile environment' policy.⁴⁸ And the department was criticised for failing to engage expert asylum and immigration organisations on its controversial Rwanda asylum policy.⁴⁹ Greater input into the planning of this priority outcome would stand to improve the chances of its delivery being achieved, and it would enhance the quality of evaluation undertaken.

- **The time before future spending reviews, when outcomes are set, should be used to engage expert views from those outside departments, from service users, on the front line and in arms' length bodies such as NHS England.** They should have an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the formation of the outcomes, to decisions about what measures and targets will be used to track delivery, and the development of strategy for achieving each outcome. The Cabinet Office and Treasury should not approve any outcomes, or ODPs, without evidence that the department has incorporated outside views into its plans.

Ministers will find the ODP framework more useful if they embrace it

The framework has suffered from a lack of ministerial engagement since its implementation. We heard that some ministers do not see it as a tool to help them oversee delivery and lead their departments, in part because they do not always see their personal priorities reflected in the priority outcomes. While the use of outcomes and measures improved the information available to ministers during the spending review process, the extent to which they actually used that information is unclear. Some senior ministers have apparently questioned whether it would be preferable to remove the framework entirely.

On becoming prime minister Liz Truss pledged that "we will deliver, we will deliver, we will deliver".⁵⁰ And with just two years until the next general election, ministers will need to be able to demonstrate their impact. The performance framework is the best way of doing this. But it does require their engagement. As we argued above, it is sensible to root spending review bids in an explanation of what they will contribute to priority outcomes. But that needs ministers to analyse those bids and allow them to inform their decisions.

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- **Ministers should use the outcomes and ODPs as a central tool for their leadership of their departments.** If ministers do not feel their outcomes properly represent their priorities or that the plans do not add up, they should work with their departments and the centre of government to amend the ODP and change approach. If they think the reporting process overly bureaucratic or in any way unhelpful they should, again, agree changes with the Cabinet Office and Treasury. They should not ignore or try to remove the framework.

Ministers need to believe the prime minister will hold them to account

The performance framework will be most useful if it is seen as important and consequential, particularly by ministers. This requires the prime minister to engage directly with the framework, using it as a personal tool to oversee progress towards her priorities. Public Service Agreements proved useful for Tony Blair's government, especially following the 2001 general election, in part because Blair involved himself in their reporting and evaluation, through regular 'stocktake' meetings with the relevant ministers and senior officials.⁵¹ Truss should learn from this approach.

- **Truss should instigate regular stocktake meetings with secretaries of state and senior officials to pore over the latest performance data, discuss the government's top priorities, unblock problems and, ultimately, hold her team to account for their work.**

Knowing they will be held accountable for progress towards their priorities will act as an incentive for ministers themselves to use the framework. In turn, senior officials are more likely to view the framework as integral to the management of their department if ministers make clear that it is important.

The Cabinet Office and Treasury need to share ownership of the framework

One of the benefits of the new performance framework as rooted around priority outcomes and ODPs has been its joint ownership by the Cabinet Office and the Treasury, with input from No.10. This has helped to bring financial management from the Treasury and wider government performance closer together. And it has opened up the possibility that other aspects of the performance framework could be incorporated into the same analysis, for instance the major projects portfolio, the No.10 Delivery Unit's 'missions' and the prime minister's separate list of top priorities.

This principle was vindicated by the successful joint ownership of the approach after its implementation. In particular, Alex Chisholm, the civil service chief operating officer and permanent secretary for the Cabinet Office, and Cat Little, director general for public spending and head of the finance function at the Treasury, were seen by interviewees as providing effective shared leadership of the framework. This amplified the importance of the framework across government as it was rolled out.

But the principle of shared ownership by the Cabinet Office and the Treasury is in question, as a consequence of the lack of engagement by some ministers described above. If it is managed entirely by either the Cabinet Office or the Treasury, without input from the other, the framework will suffer either with a lack of financial relevance or a separation from the wider picture of government performance.

- **The new government should ensure that the framework remains a shared endeavour, owned and used by the Cabinet Office, No 10 and the Treasury, as well as departments.**

The planning and co-ordination of cross-cutting outcomes needs work

The recognition of 20 cross-cutting outcomes, led by one department but contributed to by others, is a useful feature of the performance framework and a first step towards better cross-Whitehall co-ordination. Interviewees told us of cross-cutting priority outcomes that have given rise to senior civil service-level working groups between departments to help plan and implement work.

We understand that work has been done in the past year to strengthen the approach to cross-cutting outcomes, but it remains underdeveloped in the most recently published ODPs. Most describe, at a high level, the programmes departments are planning to contribute to their cross-cutting outcomes. DWP describes other departments' contributions to their outcome to maximise employment – such as BEIS's ownership of the Employment Bill, DfE's Youth Employment Programme, DLUHC's roll-out of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund or the Treasury's macroeconomic policies.

But the plans contain little consideration of how these departments will co-ordinate in practice in the year ahead. The Cabinet Office and the Treasury expect the lead department to organise work across government but there are no expectations for how that co-ordination should be conducted or demonstrated. And we heard that some cross-cutting outcomes are not being co-ordinated well between departments. Others argued that, if departments are facing reduced budgets and workforces, cross-cutting outcomes are seen as the first to be compromised as they are not the core priorities of contributing departments.

It is often right for the centre of government to delegate responsibility for co-ordinating cross-cutting issues to the lead department – as long as that department has the necessary authority to broker contributions from other departments. But that cross-cutting work must be a priority and that co-ordination must happen. If not, the Cabinet Office in particular should use its co-ordinating position to improve cross-cutting arrangements.

- **Senior officials at the centre and in departments should ensure that future ODPs give greater thought to, and detail, how cross-cutting outcomes will be co-ordinated.** This could include the circulation of guidance for lead departments on how they should co-ordinate their cross-cutting outcomes, including inter-departmental working groups, reporting processes, joint teams and similar arrangements.

ODPs and their reporting should be made flexible enough to accommodate differences between departments

It is useful that ODPs are structured consistently across government. This has helped the framework to bed into Whitehall by creating a common language shared between departments. And by setting a small number of priority outcomes, departments have a means by which they can prioritise their work, should they choose to.

As the central planning documents for government, though, it is also important ODPs reflect the full breadth of departments' work. Some have been successful in reorienting their internal planning and performance reporting around the priority outcomes of their ODPs. We hear that at least one department had gone as far as to allocate responsibility for priority outcomes explicitly between its directors general, to further embed the framework within its internal planning and reporting structures.

But other departments have reported difficulty, or resistance, to using ODPs. The main reason given for not making better use of ODPs within departments is that they are not yet relevant enough to capture the full breadth of the department's work or practical priorities. This is most often the case for departments such as DHSC that oversee large administrative structures, arms' length bodies and front-line services outside their core Whitehall teams.

- **The centre of government should allow some flexibility in the structure of ODPs to enable departments to better reflect the 'business as usual' functions** they oversee which do not neatly fit into a priority outcome.

This could entail expanded metrics and programme descriptions to include other relevant parts of the department, or short outlines of departments' service functions. This would make ODPs more relevant to departments, increasing the chances of them being used to inform internal executive planning and reporting. And it could also increase the extent to which priority outcomes support real prioritisation of issues across government, by giving departments an avenue through which to capture services that fall outside priority outcomes but remain important.

- **The way performance is reported to the centre of government should also now be flexed** to be more useful for departments. Quarterly reporting has proven useful to the centre but its rigidity is so far restricting its value for reporting departments. We heard, for example, that strict word limits on the explanations departments can give for their progress towards priority outcomes are undermining the extent to which the process can be used to support actual planning between those departments and the centre of government.

It is important that a consistent view of government performance is available to the centre of government and across Whitehall. But that does not mean that the process cannot vary between departments, reflecting the varied landscape of government priorities each institution oversees.

Priority outcomes need to align with, not duplicate, other targets and reports

The framework is intended to create a single view of government performance. This should be achieved in part by aligning and removing duplication between the various performance regimes that exist across government. As well as the priority outcomes and ODPs, these include the No 10 Delivery Unit's 'missions', the Infrastructure and Project Authorities 'major projects portfolio', the prime minister's separate list of top priorities, regular financial reporting to the Treasury, and individual sets of targets and metrics used to manage the relationship between departments and their arms' length bodies and front-line services, such as the targets set out in NHS England's Long Term Plan.⁵² Duplication between these sets of targets and objectives creates burdensome overlap for departments reporting progress back to the centre of government. Conversely, misalignment between these regimes makes the central framework less relevant to departments, who are focused on achieving the front-line targets they have set with their ALBs and services.

Bringing the various performance regimes together into the same quarterly dashboard to be used across government was a useful first step. But this process is unfinished. Departments are still expected to report progress against these different orders of targets and objectives separately to different teams at the centre of government, even where doing so draws on the same performance analysis.

- **The Cabinet Office and Treasury should simplify reporting processes so that departments only ever have to report the same information once to the centre of government, which can be used multiple times.** And the government's long-term aim should be to automate as much of this process as possible, improving efficiency.
- **The next set of outcomes and measures should also be agreed with existing front-line targets and metrics in mind.** To be most effective, targets require ongoing political attention,⁵³ but there are many targets that have been missed for years, particularly in the NHS,⁵⁴ with little political action. Layering outcomes and metrics on top of existing targets, without properly considering how they relate to each other, could exacerbate this situation.

Conclusion

The current ODP framework is far from perfect. But it is a good response to three perennial problems that have hindered successive governments: long-term and cross-departmental co-ordination; oversight of delivery; and the relationship between financial and service performance.

Liz Truss and her cabinet do not have much time to grapple with these. But with the election two years away they have even less time to attempt an overhaul of a system that after two years is finding its feet. They should break the pattern of previous incoming governments and embrace the existing framework – if ministers do they will find it a powerful ally. This is particularly so for the prime minister, who can use it to hold her ministerial team to account for their contributions to her policy programme and ensure that the government is, as she wishes, focused on delivery.

Glossary

A **theory of change** is an explanation of how an objective will be achieved. In terms of government performance, it is an explanation of a department's plans to achieve its objectives. It should explain:

- the system (and delivery chain) in which the policy issue exists
- the role of the department, other departments and other actors
- the impact the department is expecting to see from its work
- how work will be evaluated, progress measured and the approach amended.

Targets are a defined, measurable expression of an objective or outcome. The Public Value Framework specifies that targets should be "SMART" – specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-based.

A **trajectory** is the path towards an objective that must be taken for an overall outcome to be achieved.

Milestones are targets or objectives along the way that can be used to judge whether government is on the correct trajectory.

Metrics are quantitative measures used to monitor progress towards an outcome. Most metrics are either inputs, outputs or outcomes.

Inputs are measures of the resources that go into a system, such as staff, equipment and budgets.

Outputs are measures of the activities inputs are used to affect, such as the availability of GP appointments, social security waiting times or school class sizes.

Outcomes are measures of the real-world impact of those outputs, such as life expectancy, crime rates or staff engagement levels.

A **delivery chain** is the description of the network, or system, of actors that affect performance, and through which a theory of change is enacted. When considering class sizes, for example, a delivery chain would include the Department for Education, local authorities, schools, charities and more.

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About the authors

Rhys Clyne

Rhys is a senior researcher at the Institute for Government, working on civil service reform and policy making. Before joining the Institute in December 2020, Rhys worked in local government on a range of policy areas including citizen participation, decentralisation, Brexit preparations, welfare reform and the pandemic response.

Nick Davies

Nick is the programme director leading the Institute's work on public services and outsourcing. Before joining the Institute, Nick was public services manager at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. He has also worked at Children England, London Youth and as a parliamentary researcher for an MP. Nick has been a commentator in print, on the radio and TV, for outlets including Sky News, *Newsnight*, *BBC Breakfast*, BBC Radio 5 Live, *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*.

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 instituteforgovernment.org.uk

 enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

 +44 (0) 20 7747 0400  +44 (0) 20 7766 0700

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**Institute for Government, 2 Carlton Gardens
London SW1Y 5AA, United Kingdom**

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