



**DEPARTMENT OF THE
PRIME MINISTER AND CABINET**
TE TARI O TE PIRIMIA ME TE KOMITI MATUA

Guidance for planning and implementing complex programmes

Part 1: For senior leaders

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Background to this guidance

This guidance focuses on the key things senior leaders need to think about and put in place when they are responsible for implementing complex programmes.

What is this guidance?

The Implementation Unit supports the public service to strengthen implementation of Government's key priorities. The Unit has written this guidance based on the lessons and best practices it has identified through its work with agencies responsible for delivering complex programmes, drawing on agencies' experience and expertise.

This guidance is in **two parts**. Both guides can be read together and support different levels of responsibility. The guidance is not exhaustive, nor is it prescriptive. There are many programme management methodologies that can be used to deliver programmes. This guidance does not replace any of those, nor does it replace guidance available from Te Tai Ōhanga – the Treasury and Te Kawa Mataaho – Public Service Commission.

Part one is a reminder for senior leaders about the most important decisions to be made at the beginning of a programme's implementation and as the programme progresses. It outlines the decisions senior leaders should make, identifies possible options, and provides some of the questions that should guide each decision.

Part two supports programme directors and managers to give effect to the decisions senior leaders make.

Who is this guidance for?

- *Senior leaders* who are responsible for leading programme implementation
- *Programme directors and managers* who manage programme implementation
- *Central agencies*, who may find this guidance a useful reference for working with agencies who are implementing complex programmes.

When should this guidance be used?

This guidance is best used as programme implementation is being established but can also be used as a checklist as implementation progresses.

What other resources are available?

A range of guidance and resources outside of this guide are available to support officials preparing to implement new programmes. These include the [System Design Toolkit](#), developed by Te Kawa Mataaho – Public Service Commission, and the [Better Business Cases™](#) guidance and [Gateway guidance](#) developed by Te Tai Ōhanga – the Treasury. Other resources are linked where relevant.

In addition, officials preparing to implement new, complex programmes may need to:

- refer to relevant Cabinet Office circulars, such as [CO \(19\) 6](#) (Investment Management and Asset Performance in the State Services) and [CO \(18\) 2](#) (Proposals with Financial Implications and Financial Authorities)
- consult with relevant system leaders, such as Te Waihanga (New Zealand Infrastructure Commission), New Zealand Government Procurement and Property, and the Government Chief Digital Office.

Identifying a complex programme

Defining a complex programme

A complex programme has one or more of the following features:

- It is a significant government priority and usually seeks to deliver clear outcomes for specific populations or groups in New Zealand.
- It may involve complex policy design with many strands to implement.
- It generally involves multiple agencies, potentially of different types, and may involve different parts of the same agency.
- Its implementation will take more than one year.
- It involves significant financial and/or human resource investment.
- Successful delivery may rely on a wide range of stakeholders and third parties inside and outside of government.

The existence of a complex programme is generally signalled by:

- Government, through its manifesto, speeches from the throne, Cabinet, and or Ministers, directing officials to develop or change a significant policy that will in turn be complex to implement, and/or
- a complex programme or package of initiatives being put together during the annual Budget process.

These mechanisms often lead to either:

- new policy needing to be developed before implementation can begin, and/or
- new or changed funding needs over multiple years and potentially across multiple appropriations.

Deciding who will be responsible

Regardless of its origin, it is important that the right people are engaged early to determine whether policy and/or Budget decisions indicate that a complex programme should be formed.

Even at this early stage there are important decisions to be made. These decisions include:

- Will there be a lead minister and a lead agency for implementation of the programme, and will this be the same Minister and agency as for the policy and Budget development? Can this be identified early?
- Will there be a group of Ministers who support the lead minister and have oversight of programme implementation? What decision-making delegations will they have? How will they exercise oversight and how and when will they (or the lead Minister) report to Cabinet?
- How will the Chief Executive of the lead agency give effect to their responsibilities? Will governance be set at Chief Executives' level or at senior leaders' level, and what will this decision be based on? To what extent should there be independent members of the governance arrangements including at programme oversight level?

At the same time consideration should be given as to whether more formal governance mechanisms under the Public Service Act 2020 should apply. If doing this would be appropriate, senior leaders should in the first instance discuss with Te Kawa Mataaho – Public Service Commission.

Funding the programme

Given the funding arrangements might reflect the complexity of the programme itself (for example; funding sits across a number of different appropriations, or is a mix of new and baseline funding), it is important that all funding associated with the programme is identified at the outset. The funding arrangements should be clear to both those involved in the programme, along with interested external parties, including Parliament.

Engaging Cabinet

It is good practice for Cabinet papers about significant policy design to include a section on implementation, and/or if it is significant enough, to have a follow-up paper solely on implementation.

Those responsible for identifying complex programmes as part of Budget processes should discuss with their Minister whether to prepare a Cabinet paper that outlines key accountabilities and facets of implementation. This provides a foundation for senior leaders to set up all other facets of implementation.

Considerations that make a difference

There are many different forms of programme management and many highly skilled and experienced programme managers. Senior leaders can access these disciplines relatively easily.

Outside of formal programme management roles and disciplines there is relatively little focus on the key things that senior leaders should consider and hold constant if they are responsible for implementing a complex programme.

Some factors contribute to success throughout all stages of programme implementation. These revolve around the senior leaders across agencies and include:

Effective and strong relationships

Where multiple agencies and/or other stakeholders are involved and critical to the success of a complex programme, it is important that key players take the time to strengthen existing and build new relationships. It is often said – and is very true – that when something goes wrong, the strength of relationships will make the difference.

Investing in strong relationships will pay off and should enable free, frank and focussed conversations to occur enabling a focus on solutions – respect, trust and transparency will be important throughout the life of the programme.

This includes taking the time to develop relationships when there are key personnel changes in agencies throughout the life of a programme. It is also useful for all parties to be aware of the skills and experience of senior leaders across agencies have. This will enable a range of skills to be called on as implementation progresses.

Clarity about programme accountabilities and responsibilities

It is worth ensuring the senior leaders across agencies have the same understanding of accountabilities and responsibilities. These should regularly be revisited at each implementation phase and/or when something significant changes. Roles and responsibilities established at the beginning of a programme may need to change during implementation.

Taking time to understand different priorities, perspectives, and what is critical for each agency

Senior leaders are busy and are generally juggling multiple priorities. It is important to ensure those involved understand each agencies' priorities, and that there is robust discussion and resolution reached should individual agencies' priorities clash with programme objectives during implementation.

All parties understand there will be trade-offs to be made

This should be surfaced early, and all parties should commit to robust discussion as and when trade-offs must be made. This will enable the options for trade-offs to be canvassed and understood and deliberate decisions made.

Where officials make significant trade-offs, these should be explicit, and the rationale documented. Consideration needs to be given as to what line of sight Ministers should have over trade-offs even if the delegations sit with officials.

All parties understand that at times decisions need to be made and all move on

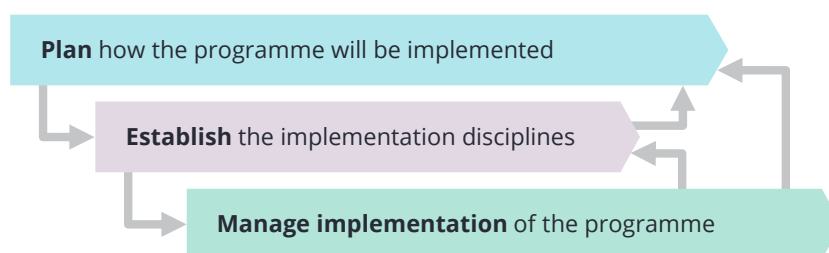
It is also important for senior leaders to leave past issues or concerns at the door unless they are directly relevant to the implementation of the programme at hand.

Key decisions for senior leaders planning complex programmes

A simplified approach to programme management

Implementing a complex programme is a dynamic process and there are many different versions of the number and type of phases implementation can take. The focus of this guidance is to provide a lens for senior leaders to think about and make key decisions. The complexity of the programme management methodology selected is not restricted by the approach taken in this guidance. A programme director would be expected to operate a more comprehensive and sophisticated set of programme disciplines than the simplified version shown in this guidance.

To illustrate decisions at different points in the life of a programme, this guidance uses a simplified view of a programme's phases:



In this view, each phase is connected to the others, and elements of each phase occur concurrently or in some cases in a cycle. For example, planning influences how delivery is managed, and ongoing delivery influences what further planning is needed.

Key decisions at the planning stage

The core focus of this guidance is decisions at the **planning** stage, where decisions have the widest repercussions throughout the implementation of the programme.

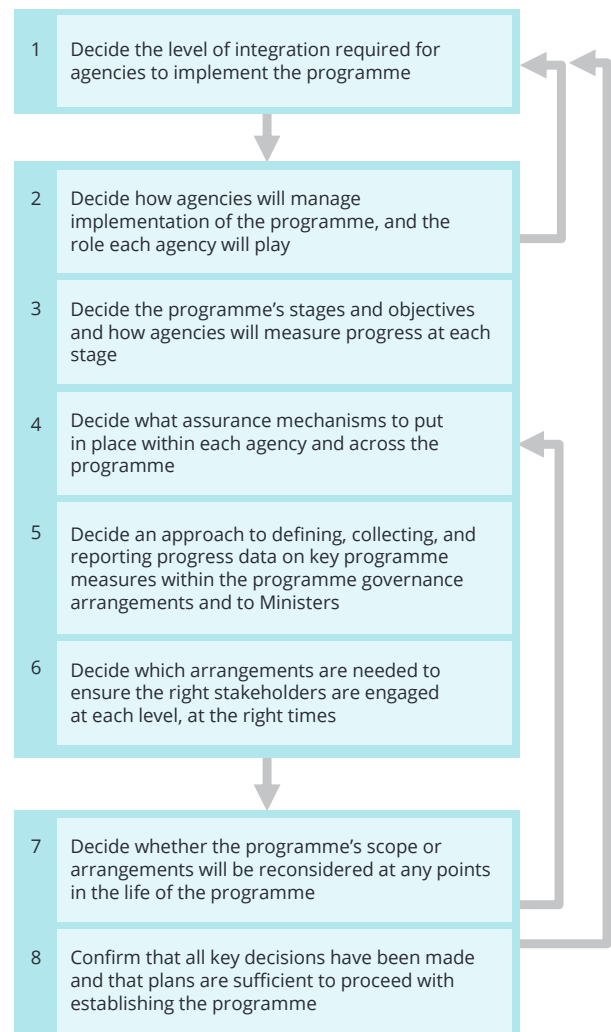
The first key decision for senior leaders is the level of integration between agencies.

The level of integration informs the options for a set of decisions on how to implement the programme. Each decision has implications for other planning decisions.

Even if delivery is not integrated across the programme, some aspects may be integrated. For example, agencies may choose to align procurement or contracting processes regardless of whether they establish a shared programme management function.

Before putting the implementation disciplines in place two decisions can be made independently to the other decisions. Making these decisions may require returning to earlier decisions and replanning where more detail is needed.

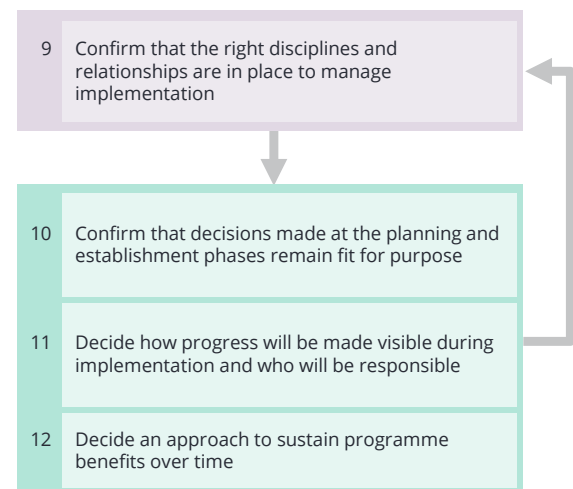
The table on page 9 and 10 outlines illustrative options for each of these key decisions at the **planning** stage along with questions to ask to inform the most suitable decision.



Key decisions at the establish and manage implementation phases

At the **establish** phase, senior leaders should confirm that the right disciplines and relationships are in place. This should include practices put in place to regularly assess the context in which the programme is implemented.

External risk assurance and periodic reviews should be designed into the programme plan. The plan should clearly identify each level of assurance.



The right mix of levels will depend on the complexity, scale, size of the investment, and longevity of the programme, but could include:

- a first level of assurance within the programme
- a second level drawing on the lead agencies' wider assurance mechanisms
- potentially a third independent level such as an Independent Quality Assurance (IQA) or Gateway process.

At the **manage implementation** phase, senior leaders should make progress visible and ensure that key decisions remain fit for purpose.

Senior leaders need practices in place that will alert them to the possibility that implementation is not going well and the associated risks to the success of the programme. Senior leaders and their officials will need to identify changes occurring in the context or environment in which the programme is being implemented. Changes need to be identified in a timely manner so that senior leaders can assess the impacts on implementation and make changes where appropriate – including escalation to Ministers. Responding early to issues and recognising the potential cumulative impact of small, unrelated issues will mean more options are available to bring the programme back on track when action needs to be taken. Senior leaders should monitor the impacts of any remedial action and be prepared to adjust programme practices if they prove to be not fit for purpose.

The tables on pages 9 and 10 outline the key decisions and questions for the **establish** and **manage implementation** phases.

Key decisions required when planning to implement a complex programme

The planning stage involves a series of related decisions. Different options are linked: for example, a decision to have a high level of integration across agencies is less compatible with agencies defining their own measures of progress or reporting independently. Options that are likely to be compatible are colour-coded to show how one decision can influence other decisions – however, a programme’s specific circumstances might suit a combination of options that are otherwise ‘incompatible’.

Key to colour-coding	Options compatible with minimal coordination	Options compatible with some coordination	Options compatible with moderate coordination	Options compatible with extensive coordination	Options independent of other decisions
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Key decisions for senior leaders	Illustrative options			Questions to inform decisions	
<i>Decisions that are linked</i>					
1 Decide the level of integration required for agencies to implement the programme	Agencies implement their parts of the programme independently with minimal coordination except for reporting	Agencies implement their parts of the programme independently, but some aspects may be coordinated	Most of the implementation is coordinated across agencies but agencies independently implement some parts of the programme or its processes	Implementation is fully integrated, and agencies work together to implement all parts of the programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What level of coordination will deliver the best results for programme implementation? • Are the third-party delivery partners or end users sufficiently different across agencies to minimise the transaction costs for stakeholders to engage with several agencies? • What is the existing level of coordination across the agencies? • What are the barriers to integration and can agencies manage barriers effectively? Will each agency face the same barriers to implementation or compete for the same resources?
2 Decide how agencies will manage implementation of the programme, and the role each agency will play	Agencies manage implementation through their own arrangements	A lead agency coordinates across agencies to implement specific aspects of the programme	A structure is created that includes a central programme management function to support cross-agency coordination	A structure is created that includes a central programme management function to support joint implementation by agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What programme management functions are needed to support senior leaders to lead implementation? • Are there any existing arrangements in place that could undertake these functions for the programme, or are new arrangements needed? • If there is a system leader, what input should they have into other agencies’ approach and design?
3 Decide the programme’s stages and objectives and how agencies will measure progress at each stage	There are very few programme-wide objectives. Agencies define objectives and measures of success for their own initiatives	Agencies have distinct measures of success for their own initiatives and contribute to a set of programme-wide objectives	The programme shares a set of core objectives and all agencies use the same measures of success		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How coherent does the implementation plan need to be across agencies to support successful implementation? • How will the success of the programme be defined? How aligned to the definition does each agency need to be? • How will risks and issues be dealt with across the programme? If milestones are missed, are there escalation paths, offramps or back-up plans? Should these be agency-specific, or programme-wide?
4 Decide what assurance mechanisms to put in place within each agency and across the programme	Each agency has an assurance mechanism in place but there are very few programme-wide assurance mechanisms across all agencies	Each agency has assurance mechanisms in place and the programme has external assurance mechanisms that apply to all agencies	The same internal and external assurance mechanisms are applied to all agencies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will agencies know in a timely manner if the programme starts to falter? Are programme-wide and/or agency-specific mechanisms embedded in programme plans and governance to identify when action is needed? • What levels and mechanisms of internal and external programme assurance will be established? What will their schedule be throughout the life of the programme? • How will changes in the programme’s context or environment – at an agency level and a programme level – be identified as the programme is being implemented, and how frequently will this occur?

Key decisions for senior leaders	Illustrative options			Questions to inform decisions
5 Decide an approach to defining, collecting, and reporting progress data on key programme measures within the programme governance arrangements and to Ministers	Agencies create their own data definitions and collect and report on progress independently. A programme-wide report is a collection of reports from each agency	Agencies align definitions, collect data and report independently. Agencies agree on the nature and content of programme-wide reporting and a central function collates data for programme reports	The same data definitions are used by all agencies. Data collection and reporting is integrated across the programme by the central programme management function	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there key terms or definitions that all agencies will use to implement the programme? • What is the most effective form of programme-level reporting to Ministers? How will this operate? • Should agencies report individually, collectively, or both? Who is responsible for collecting and reporting progress data across the programme? • What should be reported inside and outside the programme, including to the public?
6 Decide which arrangements are needed to ensure the right stakeholders are engaged at each level, at the right times	Agencies have different stakeholders and can interact with their respective stakeholders independently	Agencies interact with many of the same stakeholders and should take a coordinated approach to working with stakeholders across the programme	Stakeholder groups are key to successful delivery. Extensive coordination is required, and some groups should be represented in the programme structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have key stakeholder groups (including iwi-Māori and end users) been identified? What is the programme-level engagement plan? How will end users be engaged with, and by whom? • To what extent should agencies coordinate when engaging with iwi-Māori, stakeholders, and/or end users? • Should any stakeholders provide formal input to senior leaders or agencies as part of programme arrangements?
<i>Decisions that can be taken independently of other decisions</i>				
7 Decide whether the programme's scope or arrangements will be reconsidered at any points in the life of the programme	No – the assumptions underpinning the programme's scope and arrangements are unlikely to change and will not need to be reassessed	Yes – the assumptions underpinning the programme can be forecast with reasonable confidence but should be tested with the governance layer at key milestones or pre-determined decision points	Yes – the programme's viability or value depends on assumptions which may change and should be tested regularly. Ministers should receive options at key points and consider escalating to Cabinet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What assumptions underpin the viability or value of the programme? Are assumptions likely to change during delivery, or are there other circumstances where parts of the programme would pause or change substantially? • Who will make decisions on the future of the programme? • What assumptions and/or milestones will trigger a reassessment of scope, timeframes, and/or funding and resource requirements? How will these assumptions and milestones be monitored?
8 Confirm that all key decisions have been made and that plans are sufficient to proceed with establishing the programme	No – key elements of the programme plan are not yet completed, need greater detail, or need to be replanned before the programme can be established	Yes – the programme plan covers the most important elements and establishment can begin, but some elements of planning are yet to be completed or need greater detail	Yes – the programme plan covers all the important elements and establishment can begin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have the assumptions or the operating context underpinning the programme changed? If so, should any programme settings be reassessed? • Is the right capability and capacity in place to establish the programme? Can agencies recruit, procure or build what they need? • Have agencies formed the necessary working relationships and engaged all stakeholders, including iwi-Māori and end users? • Do plans provide senior leaders the right decision points, escalation tracks, and offramps? • Are oversight, assurance, and decision-making processes suitable for the size of the investment? • If needed, do plans factor in the design and implementation of change management processes?

Key decisions required when establishing a complex programme

Key decisions for senior leaders	Questions to inform decisions
9 Confirm that the right disciplines and relationships are in place to manage implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are agencies clear on who will deliver what, where they will work together, and what their responsibilities are within the overall programme? • Are there clearly defined measures of success? Have agencies identified and agreed primary and contributory milestones? • Are internal and, where appropriate, external assurance mechanisms in place? • Has the appropriate formal programme management methodology been adopted and are its disciplines in place? • Are meeting cadences in place at each level, and is there enough dedicated time to adequately manage implementation? • Has the right capability to effectively manage implementation been identified and put in place across agencies and within each agency? • Are strong working relationships in place between agencies, with key stakeholder groups (including iwi-Māori and end users), and any third party providers? • Are data collection processes, reporting formats, and routines defined and in place across the programme? • Are the governance arrangements identified and in place along with the relevant supporting programme management arrangements at lower levels?

Key decisions required when managing implementation of a complex programme

At the **manage implementation** phase, the programme structure comes to life and supports senior leaders to implement the programme. Planning will continue as the programme is delivered and lessons learnt are incorporated to continually improve implementation, and new elements of the programme may be established over time.

Key decisions for senior leaders	Questions to inform decisions
10 Confirm that decisions made at the planning and establishment phases remain fit for purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the right people and agencies at the table at each level, and do they have what they need to manage implementation? • Are there distinct phases of implementation that will require different approaches, skills, and programme management requirements? • Will any part of the programme arrangements need to change in scope or functions once milestones are met?
11 Decide how progress will be made visible during implementation and who will be responsible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who owns the narrative of implementation and its progress and how is the narrative kept alive? • What part will each agency play in ensuring coherent messaging about implementation? • How and when will Ministers know whether the programme is on track to achieve its intended objectives?
12 Decide an approach to sustain programme benefits over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who will be responsible for sustaining benefits after the end of the programme? • What is needed to sustain benefits after the end of the programme, and what can be put in place during implementation? • Does the programme need a transition plan, and if so, who should be responsible for its creation and at what stage in implementation should it occur?

A checklist for implementing complex programmes at each phase

Phase	Does the programme have...?
Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> A clear set of objectives and specific results that each agency will contribute <input type="checkbox"/> A governance structure with terms of reference that outline accountabilities, decision rights, delegations, and escalation paths <input type="checkbox"/> A programme structure with clearly defined scope and functions for each programme management body <input type="checkbox"/> A lead agency with a defined set of responsibilities <input type="checkbox"/> Strong working relationships between key agencies <input type="checkbox"/> An end-to-end programme plan including key milestones, offramps and back-up plans, and decision points for senior leaders, Ministers and Cabinet <input type="checkbox"/> Shared measures of progress and a programme-wide reporting framework <input type="checkbox"/> Relationships with stakeholders and engagement plans(including end users) <input type="checkbox"/> A risk register and assurance arrangements (including any external reviews)
Establish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Routines in place at each level of the programme to manage implementation <input type="checkbox"/> Processes for reporting, stakeholder engagement, decision-making (including spending decisions) and procurement that are ready from Day 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Capacity within the programme to manage all processes in a timely way <input type="checkbox"/> A change management strategy (if needed)
Manage implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Clear measures of progress that are reported on regularly and visibly <input type="checkbox"/> Effective support from senior leaders for the agreed level of coordination between agencies <input type="checkbox"/> Timely reassessments of the suitability of the programme structure <input type="checkbox"/> A consistent approach across the programme to the same stakeholders <input type="checkbox"/> Forums for agencies to identify shared issues and opportunities <input type="checkbox"/> Feedback loops where frontline experience informs planning and delivery <input type="checkbox"/> A transition plan for sustaining benefits beyond the programme