SEE-THROUGH WHITEHALL

Departmental Business Plans one year on

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Contents

About the authors

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Acknowledgements

Executive summary

The Prime Minister launched the Business Plans last year stating: *"Instead of bureaucratic accountability to the government machine, these Business Plans bring in a new system of democratic accountability – accountability to the people."*[1] In addition to their public-facing role, the Business Plans play a key role in helping the Centre (No.10/Cabinet Office/HMT) to hold departments to account for the implementation of the Programme for Government reforms.

Despite their name, the departmental Business Plans are not the same as a traditional private sector business plan. Instead they are a composite document, mostly focusing on the Government's reform agenda and the detailed actions that the departments will carry out to try and achieve it. However, there are sections which go beyond just the reforms the department is responsible for. These set out the vision for the department, high level financial information for the whole of the department's business, 'Input Indicators' for specific areas, and the information strategy for that department. Finally, each departmental Business Plan includes 'Impact Indicators' which can be used to judge the impact the department is having.

One year in, the Business Plans are still evolving. In this paper, the Institute looks at the progress the Business Plans have made so far and offers practical suggestions for how they can be further improved. Whilst this paper focus primarily on the more problematic areas and issues that require further work, the Institute's view is that the Business Plans represent a positive step towards a more open and transparent form of government.

Recommendations

In this paper, the Institute considers how the Business Plans are being used from the perspective of three key groups: the public, the departments and the Centre.

The Public

The public are a key audience for the Business Plans. By transparently publishing information on government plans and performance, it is hoped that the public will consequently be better equipped to hold government to account. However, there are steps that should be taken to make the plans more accessible to those hoping to use them. More should be done to clarify the precise scope of the Business Plans and how they fit with the numerous other performance and accountability mechanisms within government. It would also be helpful if all the information relating to the Business Plans was published in a single place and in a useable format. Consequently, we recommend:

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[1] Speech from David Cameron at the launch of the Business Plans publication 08/11/10
http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-on-business-plans/

Recommendation 1:

The Business Plans should have a clear scope and narrative. We recommend that the Business Plans focus solely on the Government's reform agenda. The different sections of the Business Plans should be clearly linked, enabling each reform to be tracked from its original outline in the Programme for Government through to the related impact indicator.

Recommendation 2:

The government should articulate how the Business Plans fit into the wider accountability landscape, in particular with respect to how departments are held to account for areas outside of reform.

Recommendation 3:

There should be one place on the No.10 website which brings together all the Business Plan information in an easily accessible and useable format. This includes the Structural Reform Plans and monthly overdue explanations, the Quarterly Data Summaries, along with other input and impact indicators.

The departments

The departments are the primary providers of all the information within the Business Plans and are responsible for actually delivering the reforms set out within them. For the Business Plans to be useful internally in government or externally, the information they contain must be as accurate as possible. Consequently, our recommendations focus on how the Business Plans information can be more fully aligned and integrated within the department's own planning and scrutiny processes:

Recommendation 4:

The Business Plans should be fully integrated with the information that departments use to manage themselves. They should in effect be a high level cut of the department's own planning tools, focusing specifically on the areas of reform.

Recommendation 5:

The refresh and planning cycle should be regularised and all Departmental Boards should sign-off any changes to their Business Plans. Having a clear opportunity to review and approve the Business Plans will help drive a greater sense of ownership by the Board.

Recommendation 6:

More frequent refresh opportunities should be considered to prevent a split between the publically reported plans and those used internally by departments.

The Centre (No.10/Cabinet Office/HMT)

The Centre plays a dual role, balancing its need to hold departments to account internally and its responsibility to provide the public with the information necessary for the government to be properly held to account for its progress in delivering the Coalition Programme for

Government. There are practical improvements that it can make to improve both internal and external accountability.

Recommendation 7:

The Centre should adopt more formal mechanisms to support join-up between departments. We recommend that No.10 set up a forum of senior officials from the departments to promote a 'whole of government' view in business planning and to act to resolve dependency and joint working issues.

Recommendation 8:

The Centre should provide a final layer of quality assurance for the Business Plans. Departments should be the primary drivers of quality, but No.10 should ensure that all the actions and overdue explanations are of sufficient quality and will be understandable to the public.

Recommendation 9:

The Centre should make sure that the information in the Business Plans is easy to use and compare. This includes both ensuring that the content of the Business Plans is clear and standardised where possible and publishing the information in a format that is easy to analyse.

Recommendation 10:

The Centre should ensure that internal accountability mechanisms are made as transparent as possible. Whilst the internal accountability process has been publicly referenced, more could be done to make the public aware of these mechanisms. The process would gain more public credibility if it was clear when departments were being called to account internally and what remedial actions were put in place.

1. Introduction

"He who fails to plan, plans to fail." - Proverb

The Departmental Business Plans were introduced by the Coalition Government in summer 2010 and were published in full that November. One year on, the plans are still evolving, but outside of Whitehall, few people are aware of their existence.

The Institute for Government has tracked the Business Plans progress and updates since their publication last year. As well as being an analyser and commentator on the information that they provide[2], the Institute has interviewed those inside and outside of government to understand the role that Business Plans play and how the supporting processes currently operate. We have then taken these insights to form our own view of how the Business Plans are currently working, and how they can be improved going forward.

This short paper explores the evolution of the Business Plans, and sets out the Institute's view of the role they could play. It then considers the plans from three key user perspectives (the Centre, the departments and the public) and offers practical suggestions for improvement.

Whilst this paper focuses on problem areas and potential solutions, the Institute's view is that the Business Plans represent a positive step towards a more open and transparent form of government. We hope that the suggestions and recommendations that this paper contains will be taken as constructive feedback and used to help improve the Business Plans further.

[2] See the Institute for Government's Whitehall Monitor publications:
http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/our-work/c1/36/the-whitehall-monitor

2. Context of the Business Plans

We came to the conclusion that it would be better to try to organise things so that the Government machine had as its immediate objectives the fulfilment of certain actions that are actually within the control of Government to fulfil.[3]

– Oliver Letwin

Content and structure of the Business Plans

Despite their name, the departmental Business Plans are not the same as traditional private sector business plans[4]. Instead, the departmental Business Plans are a composite document designed to separate out areas within the government's control for which it can be held directly to account and those objectives for which it does not have direct or total control.

The Business Plans are made up of five sections: Vision; Coalition Priorities; Structural Reform Plan; Departmental Expenditure; and Transparency (see Figure 1 - Structure of the Business Plans). The Vision section sets out the strategic direction and approach to the whole of each department's business. The Coalition Priorities section focuses on the key reforms each department will be undertaking in order to meet the commitments set out in the Coalition's Programme for Government[5]. The Structural Reform Plan (SRP) section then forms the bulk of each department's Business Plan.

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[3] Letwin giving evidence on the Business Plans at PASC 12/01/11
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpubadm/c693-i/c69301.htm
[4] Exchange at PAC on this issue 30/11/10:
"Q58 Mrs McGuire: I am trying to get a handle on who is the intended audience of the business plan. Is it technically a business plan in the sense that most of us around this table would understand a business plan to be or is it, laudably, an issue about accountability of the Government for its coalition manifesto? I just think there's a bit of confusion at the heart of this, no matter how laudable I think the idea is.
Kris Murrin: Thank you. I think it is a bit of both. I spent many years working in the private sector and it has many of the elements that you would see in a normal private sector business plan. But I think it is primarily an accountability tool. It focuses, as we have discussed, primarily on the structural reforms that the coalition Government are trying to deliver. It will be used in a number of different ways. Departments' staff are using it to work out the priorities that they are being asked to focus on, but as David [Sir David Normington KCB] *had pointed out there will be other documents that Departments will need to do the day-to-day running."*
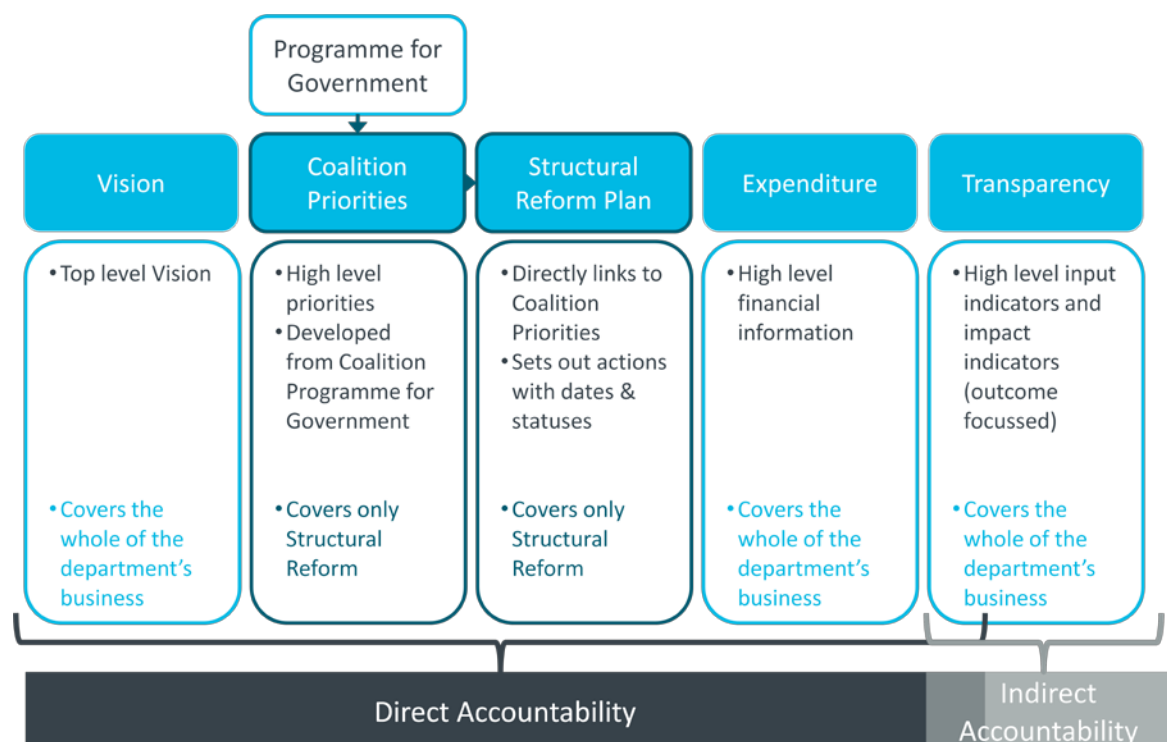http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpubacc/c650-i/c65001.htm
[5] The Coalition Programme for Government,
http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_187876.pdf

This section sets out the detail of how each of the Coalition Priorities for the department will be achieved in the form of an action plan with dates and statuses against each action. The Expenditure section provides some basic high level financial information about the department, including benchmark data on common areas of spend for departments. Finally, the Transparency section details the input and impact indicators and other data designed to provide information on whether the intended outcomes have been achieved.

Figure 1 - Structure of the Business Plans

Vision	Coalition Priorities	Structural Reform Plan	Expenditure	Transparency
• Top level Vision	• High level priorities • Developed from Coalition Programme for Government	• Directly links to Coalition Priorities • Sets out actions with dates & statuses	• High level financial information	• High level input indicators and impact indicators (outcome focussed)
• Covers the whole of the department's business	• Covers only Structural Reform	• Covers only Structural Reform	• Covers the whole of the department's business	• Covers the whole of the department's business

Programme for Government

Direct Accountability | Indirect Accountability

The bulk of the plans therefore represent areas where government can exercise direct control: what is the vision for each department; how has the Programme for Government been translated into departmental priorities; what they will do to deliver on these priorities and what do the overall budgets look like. In contrast, the impact indicators within the Transparency section are explicitly recognised as aspirational outcomes beyond the direct control of government.
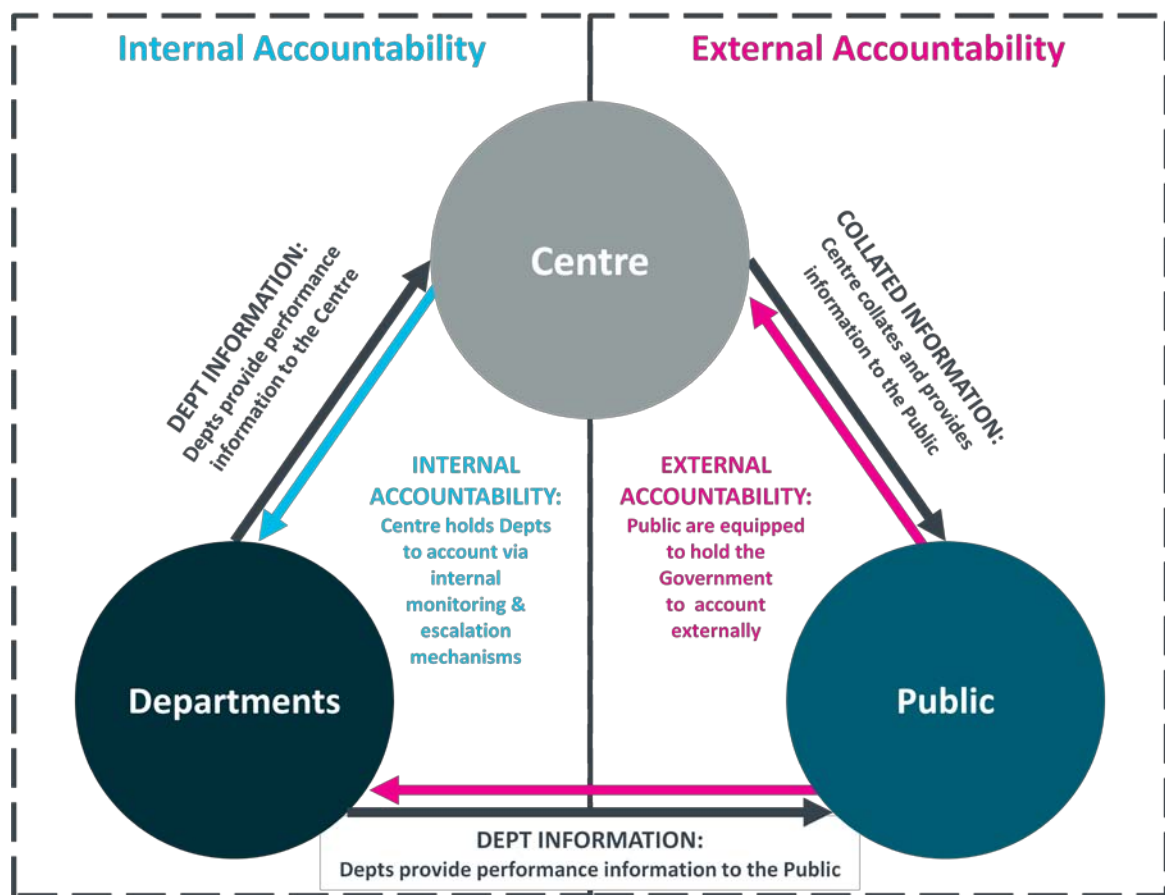
Purpose of the Business Plans

At the highest level, the Business Plans are all about improving government accountability. However, under this top level purpose, the Business Plans are linked to two coexisting forms of accountability. David Cameron described the Business Plans in the context of 'democratic accountability', whilst Oliver Letwin stated that the Business Plans were 'a tool for us',

enabling the Centre (primarily No.10, supported by HMT and Cabinet Office) to hold departments to account.

So, within the broad purpose of 'accountability' the Business Plans are simultaneously part of two distinct accountability mechanisms: external public or democratic accountability and internal accountability between departments and the Centre. See Figure 2 - Internal and External Accountability.

Figure 2 - Internal and External Accountability

For the Business Plans, external accountability or democratic accountability is strongly linked to the wider Transparency agenda. Here the key principle is that greater transparency of the information and workings of government will equip the public to be more effective in holding the government to account. This doesn't necessarily mean that there will be additional mechanisms for the public to hold government to account, but instead that they will be better informed and thus able to make better judgements and use existing accountability mechanisms more effectively.

The Business Plans support greater internal accountability, enabling the Centre to hold departments to account in their delivery of the Coalition's Programme for Government.[6] No.10 are the principle actors at the Centre driving this internal accountability, however they are strongly supported by officials at HMT and Cabinet Office particularly on the Expenditure and Transparency sections' numbers.

There is an open question of whether a single tool can properly support both internal and external accountability. The Institute's view is that making as much of the same information about government available to those who wish to hold it to account internally and externally is a positive step. We agree with Kris Murrin who noted: "I think inevitably no document can meet the needs of everyone who wants to read it to a greater degree."[7] However, by publishing the information in an accessible and useable manner, it is possible for different users to re-cut and reformat the information from the Business Plans in a way that does better suit their specific needs.

Focus of this paper

As described above, there are three key actors within the Business Plans processes: the public, the departments, and the Centre. Each of these three has a different role to play within the internal and external accountability processes. The public are an important audience for the Business Plans and can use the information contained within them to hold the government to account. The departments are the main source of the information and updates that make up the Business Plans and are responsible for delivering the programme of reforms that they describe. The Centre plays a dual role, balancing its need to hold departments to account internally and its responsibility to provide the public with the information necessary for the government to be properly held to account for its progress in delivering the Coalition Programme for Government.

This paper offers reflections on the existing roles and progress made by each of these actors and offers practical recommendations on how the processes could be improved further.

Chapter three looks first at how external democratic accountability is currently working. It then offers recommendations on how this could be enhanced by clarifying the scope of the Business Plans and simplifying the way in which they are published.

Chapter four looks at the role that departments play within the Business Plans process. Here, we argue that as the primary providers of all the information within the Business Plans, it is essential that departments feel a sense of ownership of the plans. Our recommendations focus

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[6] For the full version of the Coalition's Programme for Government, see:
http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_1 87876.pdf
[7] Kris Murrin providing evidence as the Director of No.10's Implementation Unit to PAC 30/11/10
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpubacc/c650-i/c65001.htm

on how this sense of ownership can be strengthened by aligning the Business Plans with the information departments use to manage themselves and ensuring that it can receive full internal sign-off.

Chapter five focuses on the role of the Centre. Here, we note that the Centre is at the pivot point between holding departments to account internally to ensure that the government's reforms are delivered and providing clear and comprehensive information to the public to facilitate democratic accountability. Our recommendations in this chapter focus on how the Centre can best support both the internal and external accountability mechanisms. These include facilitating better join-up between departments, providing light-touch quality assurance and ensuring that the public have greater visibility of the internal accountability mechanisms.

3. The public

"Instead of bureaucratic accountability to the government machine, these Business Plans bring in a new system of democratic accountability – accountability to the people"[8]- David Cameron

Why is democratic accountability important?

At their launch, the Prime Ministers stated that the Business Plans would enable a new era of 'democratic accountability'. Their publication was part of a wider move by government to be as transparent as possible, putting previously internal information about how government worked into the public domain. With the Business Plans, it was hoped that the public would be able to easily navigate from the top level commitment set out by the Government through to the actions that departments were taking and whether these had produced the desired outcomes.

How is democratic accountability currently working?

Despite their prominent launch, there is little indication that the public is engaging with Business Plans. A lack of direct engagement is perhaps unsurprising. Very few members of the public are likely to have a strong interest in the internal processes departments are going through to try and achieve reforms, and fewer still will be willing to go to the effort of collating and analysing the data themselves. However, there have been few stories in the media which reference or use the information from the Business Plans[9] or much in the way of analysis by any other intermediaries. These intermediaries can play a vital role in enhancing democratic accountability. By analysing the information and putting it in context, they can help the public understand what the data means and how government can be judged using it.

"I don't delude myself that very large numbers of our fellow citizens get up in the morning and do nothing else than read the Business Plans. But yes, I suspect that there will be a lot of people who gradually become more and more interested in not just the Business Plans but the data about what has been achieved by each Department."

– Oliver Letwin,PAC 12/01/11

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[8] Speech from David Cameron at the launch of the Business Plans publication 08/11/10
http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-on-business-plans/
[9] Based on the Institute's light-touch monitoring of this area and interviews with leading political correspondents on the extent to which they and their journalist peers where covering the Business Plans.

What can be done to improve the democratic accountability of the Business Plans?

It is doubtful that the majority of the public will ever be interested in using the Business Plans directly to hold government to account. However, there are steps that can be taken to make the Business Plans more useful to the individuals or intermediaries who are interested in government performance. These intermediaries, in turn, will often help make the information in the Business Plans more accessible to a wider audience or shed light on particular issues, thus improving the overall public understanding of government performance. Below, we set out several issues that the government should tackle in order to make the Business Plans more useful to those who would wish to engage with them.

The most immediate problem we encountered when using the Business Plans or talking to others about them was that no one was quite sure what their scope was. As depicted in Figure 1 - Structure of the Business Plans some parts of the Business Plans refer to structural reforms, yet other parts extend to encompass the whole of the department's business. Even within the Structural Reform Plan section, many of the actions do not seem to refer directly to the structural reforms that the government set out in the Coalition Agreement.[10]

Consequently, we recommend:

Recommendation 1:

The Business Plans should have a clear scope and narrative. We recommend that the Business Plans focus solely on the Government's reform agenda. The different sections of the Business Plans should be clearly linked, enabling each reform to be tracked from its original outline in the Programme for Government through to the related impact indicator.

The Institute's view is that the plans were originally intended to focus on the Government's programme of reforms as indicated in the following quotes:

> *I think at their most simplistic level the business plans were a way both of taking the coalition Government's programme for government, which set out its clear intent, and turning it into specific plans as to how these actions would be delivered and of giving an accountability framework.* [11] - Kris Murrin, Head of Implementation No. 10

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[10] For example, FCO actions1.3.i.a, 1.3.i.b and 1.3.i.d simply refer to foreign trips that will be made by the PM or Foreign Secretary under the section heading "1.3 Re-energise key bilateral relationships" and do not suggest any substantial reforms, structural or otherwise will be carried out.
http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/transparency/srp/view-srp/29/10
[11] PAC Evidence session on 20/11/10 – see *Departmental Business Planning*, PAC, 37th Report HC 650
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmpubacc/650/650.pdf

Business plans are a tool both for us to ensure that the Departments deliver on the commitments that we made in the coalition agreement, and also for you and for other Select Committees, and for Parliament and for the public, to be kept abreast of how we are getting on with delivering those things-so it is a tool of accountability.[12] - Danny Alexander, Chief Secretary to the Treasury

This should include all the reforms set out in the Coalition Agreement and there should be flexibility to add any new reforms that the Government hopes to introduce[13]. We would also recommend that the Business Plans join up the inputs and outcomes for each area of reform. As the NAO noted, there are areas of reform which are not currently clearly linked to their related costs[14]. Each high level priority should be clearly linked with both its corresponding actions and other inputs/costs required to implement it. These priorities should be joined up with the outcomes and benefits that they are designed to deliver. In short it should be possible to trace all the inputs and actions against a top level priority through to the impact measures and other benefit measures that show whether it has delivered the intended outcome.

An important part of clarifying the scope of the Business Plans is to show where the boundaries and interactions are with other accountability mechanisms.

Recommendation 2:

The government should articulate how the Business Plans fit into the wider accountability landscape, in particular with respect to how departments are held to account for areas outside of reform.

With Accounting Officers, Capability Reviews, Select Committee scrutiny, NAO reports and other mechanisms in place, the government accountability landscape is complex. So to support the public in being able to use the Business Plans effectively, the government should clearly show how they fit with these other mechanisms and how they might be used in concert to build a fuller picture of government performance.

Part of tightly refocusing the Business Plans back on the Government's reform agenda is to make clear how the other 'non reform' elements will be tracked. Currently there is no equivalent of the Business Plans to hold departments or the Government to account for all of the other work that they carry out. Though departments are allowed to include a section on 'Other major responsibilities'[15], if the Business Plans are read in isolation they can paint a

[12] ibid

[13] For example any new reforms outlined within the Queen's Speech

[14] See PAC report *Departmental Business Planning (*HC 650, 11/05/11) p.10 http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmpubacc/650/650.pdf

[15] For example see p.5 in DWP's Business Plan: http://www.number10.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/DWP-Business-Plan1.pdf

skewed picture of departmental priorities – especially in cases where a department's ongoing 'business as usual' activities are significantly more substantial than their reform programmes.

Whilst out of scope for this paper, as the Business Plans do not cover the whole of the department's business, perhaps this indicates that there needs to be an accountability mechanism which does. [16]

Democratic accountability through the Business Plans could be enhanced by making them much more comparable and user friendly. Whilst the Government has made impressive steps to bring together government information on data.gov.uk[17] and on the No.10 website's 'Transparency' section[18], there is more that could still be done to improve the publication of the Business Plans.

> **Recommendation 3:**
> **There should be one place on the No.10 website which brings together all the Business Plan information in an easily accessible and useable format.** This includes the Structural Reform Plans and monthly overdue explanations, the Quarterly Data Summaries, along with other input and impact indicators.

The first step is to ensure that all the information on the Business Plans is brought together in one place. At the moment the full list of all the SRP actions[19] and the 'Structural Reform Plan Monthly Implementation Updates' are published separately[20]. This means that whilst it is possible to view the status of each SRP action on the No. 10 Transparency database, it is necessary to navigate to a separate document for each department every month to find the department's own account of why actions were overdue or the steps being taken to rectify slippages. Furthermore, there is no mention of these monthly departmental updates within the No.10 Transparency site. Without specific knowledge that it is necessary to search separately for the departmental updates, anyone browsing the No.10 Transparency site would miss the overdue explanations entirely. This has clear implications for democratic accountability as

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[16] This issue is also noted in PAC report *Departmental Business Planning (*HC 650, 11/05/11) which states: "The Business Plans do not, and are not designed to, cover the range of each Department's activities and spending and must therefore be supported by further planning to cover all areas of activity with the Department's remit."
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmpubacc/650/650.pdf
[17] See http://data.gov.uk/
[18] See http://www.number10.gov.uk/transparency/
[19] The latest statuses against the full list of Structural Reform Plan actions are published on the No. 10 Transparency site under their 'Business Plans' section here:
http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/transparency/srp/
[20] For example the collated version of the September 2011 Monthly Implementation Updates are located here: http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/september-structural-reform-plan-progress-reports-published/ as part of the No.10 news feed and are not linked to or referenced within the main Business Plans section of the No. 10 website

currently most people looking at the Structural Reform Plans would miss out on key accountability information from departments.

Bringing together all the information on the Business Plans means going beyond just the Structural Reform Plan section. The No. 10 Business Plan website focuses solely on the Structural Reform Plans with no information from the other four sections contained in the original PDF Business Plan publications[21]. The Quarterly Data Summaries, which provide information on the Expenditure & Transparency sections of the Business Plans (including Input and Impact indicators) are published separately[22] and are not referenced within the Business Plans section of the website. Interestingly, even the section of the No.10 website which sets out the list of all Input and Impact indicators to be published by departments[23] does not indicate where the data on these indicators can be found.

Overall, whilst it is a clear step forward that this information is available in the public domain, there is more that could be done to join up the different sources of information within the Business Plans. Even something as simple as publishing the links to the Structural Reform Plan Monthly Implementation Updates and the Quarterly Data Summaries within the front page of the Business Plans section on the No.10 website would help the public navigate the information available.

The second part of making the data more accessible to the public is to ensure that it is published in a format that those who wish to analyse the information can use. Currently the majority of the Business Plan data is published in separate PDF documents from each department every month. This makes it very difficult to analyse or compare the information between departments or over time. This issue is compounded by the lack of unique identifiers for the different actions. As many of the actions are very similar and because some of the specific Structural Reform Plan action descriptions have been updated over the last year, it can be very difficult to know join up all the pieces of information on an action. These are both areas where it would be possible to make quick and easy improvements.

The existing (though not advertised) API feeds from the No.10 Business Plan site[24] both allow access to the data in a more accessible format and contains a reference number for each action. Simply signposting the availability of this information, or making it available as a spreadsheet/CSV file would make the data much more user-friendly. The unique reference

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[21] See http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/business-plans-published-2/
[22] See http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/business-plan-quarterly-data-published/ for the latest information
[23] See http://www.number10.gov.uk/transparency/find-all-other-government-data/
[24] E.g. http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/transparency/api/org-srp/37 for DfE's SRP actions. API (Application Programming Interface) feeds allow direct access to a clean version of the underlying data. This can then be easily imported into a spreadsheet or database etc for further analysis if desired.

numbers for each action that the API feeds use could, if stabilised[*] be extended across all related publications on the SRP actions – enabling users of the information to join up existing information on a particular action.

Finally, clearer join-up in the external publication could help answer questions on what the scope and purpose of the Business Plans are. By making the links between the different parts of the Business Plans easier to navigate, it will be clearer to the public how they could use the information the Business Plans and the remit that they cover.

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[25] Though the API reference numbers should act as a unique reference number for each action, we have noted some irregularities. See Chapter 5 for further details.

4. The departments

"This is not an exercise of the Centre, the Treasury, the Cabinet Office, Number 10 Downing Street, imposing a Business Plan on Departments. It's a matter of the Departments themselves, the Permanent Secretary and the Secretary of State working together, producing a Business Plan that is the way in which that Department will set about achieving what the programme for government has allocated that Department as its task."[26] - Oliver Letwin

Why is departmental ownership important?

Departmental ownership and buy-in to the Business Plans is crucial if they are to succeed. With the government's focus on reducing the central bureaucratic burden, No. 10 has neither the capacity nor the desire to run the Business Plans process from the Centre. Instead, it must rely on departments to take on this agenda themselves and to ensure that Business Plans are taken seriously within the department. However, at a time of unprecedented cuts and resource tightening, departments must be able to see the benefits of having the Business Plans.

To what extent do departments currently have ownership of the Business Plans?

Whilst most departments now accept the Business Plans as an established process, there are very variable levels of ownership within departments. In some departments, Business Plans are fully integrated into the reporting and management for the Departmental Board. In other departments, a more minimal approach has been taken. Though they will fully comply with the reporting requirements, the Business Plans are viewed as a report to the Centre, rather than something that the department focuses on itself.

We do not believe that the Centre should insist that Business Plans are taken as a central driver of change within departments or that they should form the focus of Departmental Boards. Though the reform agenda is important to the government as a whole, different departments are undergoing different levels of reform and, for some, reform may not be the only or top priority for the department.

However, whilst we recognise that different departments have different priorities, the information within the Business Plans should be fully integrated with the department's own planning and reporting processes.

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[26] Oliver Letwin giving evidence to PASC 12/01/11
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpubadm/c693-i/c69301.htm

> *Recommendation 4:*
>
> **The Business Plans should be fully integrated with the information that departments use to manage themselves.** They should in effect be a high level cut of the department's own planning tools, focusing specifically on the areas of reform.

The information contained within the Business Plans should be entirely consistent with the information that departments use to manage themselves. So whilst the SRP might be grouped around different reform-based priorities to the department's overall top priorities, all of the SRP actions should be contained within the department's internal plans. In effect, the SRP actions should be seen as the 'reform-related' cut of the department's own plans. Consequently the due date and the status of each action should be the same in both the department's internal plans and those published by No.10. Where possible[27], the published explanations for any delays to these actions should be the same as those reported internally to the Departmental Board.

The key financial, resource and performance information contained within the Expenditure and Transparency sections of the Business Plans should be fully aligned with the figures reported within the department. The Departmental Boards should also have full visibility of all the information published as part of the Business Plan process.

The Business Plans process involves reporting against a few standard commodity items[28] within the common area of spend data. These indicators are easy for the public to engage with and benchmark against. Furthermore, they can be effective in revealing significant variations in how effectively departments can procure these items. However, the primary focus of the Business Plans should be on publishing as much of the information that departments use to manage themselves in as comparable manner as possible. This will help keep the reporting requirements for departments to an appropriate level, as this information should already be regularly reported on within departments.

An important part of integrating the Business Plans within the department's own management processes is to ensure that the Business Plans have the same level of scrutiny and approval as its other planning and reporting processes.

> *Recommendation 5:*
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> **The refresh and planning cycle should be regularised and all Departmental Boards should sign-off any changes to their Business Plans.** Having a clear opportunity to review and approve the Business Plans will help drive a greater sense of ownership by the Board.

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[27] There may be a very limited set of actions where the internally reported overdue explanations cannot be published externally due to security or commercial sensitivities.
[28] Currently this includes the cost of a ream of paper, the price of a KWH and the cost of a light bulb.

As well as having sight of the same set of information and actions that go into the Business Plans, we recommend that each Departmental Board sign off any changes to the Business Plans.[29] Though Departmental Boards are playing an increasingly important role in the major strategic and operational decisions of departments, their involvement can sometimes be curtailed by insufficient provision of information or the imposition of timescales which do not allow them to meet to form a decision before the formal deadline. For example the NAO noted that three Departmental Boards did not have any quorate meetings between the 2010 election and the following Spending Review, whilst in at least five departments, the Boards were either not involved in the Spending Review bids at all, or they were not briefed sufficiently to allow them to scrutinise the strategic decisions.[30] Consequently, it is essential that the formal sign off process by Departmental Boards becomes fully embedded in the Business Plan processes. To enable departments to sequence this sign-off process with their Departmental Boards, the central planning and refresh cycles for the Business Plans need to be regularised and communicated to all departments.[31]

To be fully integrated, the Business Plans must be up to date and in line with the department's own plans.

Recommendation 6:

More frequent refresh opportunities should be considered to prevent a split between the publically reported plans and those used internally by departments.

Currently the Business Plans are refreshed on an annual basis. However, as departments' own plans are likely to be revised, updated and reprioritised in relation to external events far more frequently, there is a real risk that departments will end up reporting against Business Plan actions that are obsolete or dates that are quite different to those targeted by the department.

The current annual refresh cycle is driven by both a pragmatic desire to minimise the bureaucratic burden on departments, and a concern that more frequent refreshes could make it appear that the government isn't sticking to its original commitments. Though, both are valid concerns, the Institute believes that there are mitigations that could be put in place that would enable refreshes to take place more often.

Whilst it is right that any major changes to the Business Plans should receive full scrutiny and approval from the Centre, this does not mean that more minor changes and additions could not be added in a more streamlined fashion. Departmental Boards could provide sign-off from

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[29] By 'changes to the Business Plans' we would include any amendment or additions to the SRP actions or the input or impact indicators. We do not mean that the Board would have to sign off every change of status to an SRP action.
[30] See Performance Frameworks and Board Reporting II, NAO May 2011, http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/1012/performance_frameworks_and_boa.aspx
[31] It is our understanding that No.10 does plan to regularise the refresh planning process going forward.

the department's perspective. Furthermore, if our recommendation that the Centre introduce a cross-cutting group of departmental officials (described in full in Chapter 5) is implemented, it would be possible to use this forum to check whether the changes would impact on other departments.

From a political perspective, it can be uncomfortable to admit that the government's plans have changed. However, democratic accountability is better served by explaining these changes in an open and transparent fashion. So whilst we strongly commend the government for publishing a list of the changes that were made at the last refresh[*], we believe that these and future changes could be published in an even more open and transparent fashion. Technically, there is no reason why each action in the SRP could not be published with any amendments clearly marked. For example, each action could be published with 'original date' and the latest 'target date' along with a note accounting for any variations. That way, the full audit history, along with clear explanations for any alterations would be available to the public who would be able to judge for themselves whether they Government was making the changes for justifiable reasons.

[32] See http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/2590/the-best-laid-plans/ for further comments from the Institute on the refresh annex

5. The Centre

"These are primarily designed…as a tool for us, because we have a responsibility to the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and to the Cabinet to make sure that we implement our programme for government."[33] - Oliver Letwin

Why does the Centre play an important role in Business Plans?

The Centre plays an important pivot role in the Business Plans. They must balance the dual roles of holding departments to account internally and equipping the public with information so that the government can be held to account on its performance externally.

The Business Plans process was initiated and led by No.10 and they are the best placed to collate the overall needs and requirements of the different users and to coordinate the continual improvement of the plans across government. Other parts of the Centre, notably officials in HMT and Cabinet Office, also have a role to play in this ongoing improvement. In particular, they are able to bring their expertise in cross-government evaluation and monitoring and a detailed understanding of key departmental metrics.

No.10 also has a critical role to play in providing political support and drive for the Business Plans. Both the focus of politicians and officials inside government and the media and public outside of government are strongly led by the priority and weighting that No.10 attribute to initiatives. David Cameron showed his strong support for Business Plans, articulating a radical vision for how they might be used at their launch last year.[34] Going forward, No.10 will play an important role in communicating the level of political emphasis on the Business Plans and ensuring that they have good levels of visibility and traction inside and outside of government.

What role has the Centre played to date?

The Centre's focus for the last year has been setting up and getting the Business Plans operational. Its role has been deliberately light-touch, in line with the government's aspiration to push power away from the Centre and strip back bureaucracy wherever possible. This has been practically reinforced by resource constraints on the team in No. 10 leading on the Business Plans. No.10 has taken the overall lead on the Business Plans, but the team's day-to-day focus has been on the Structural Reform Plan element. For the other elements of the Business Plans, notably the common areas of spend and the Input and Impact indicators, HMT

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[33] Letwin giving evidence on the Business Plans at PAC 09/02/11
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpubacc/c650-ii/c65001.htm
[34] Speech by David Cameron at the launch of the Business Plans 08/11/10
http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-on-business-plans/

and the Cabinet Office have played more of a leading role. Most departments published 2009-10 baseline information in these areas alongside the May 2011 Structural Reform Plans refresh and in July 2011 the first 'Quarterly Data Summaries' were published, bringing together top level data and indicators from the Business Plans on one page.[35] No.10, HMT and Cabinet Office are all at the stage where the initial foundations and processes around the Business Plans are in place, but all recognise that there is more that can be done to improve the processes further, both to reduce the reporting burden on departments and to improve the quality and utility of the information.

How can the Centre improve going forward?

There are four key areas which we believe the Centre should prioritise going forward. These span the spectrum from improving the internal processes to facilitating greater public understanding of the Business Plans, reflecting the pivotal role that the Centre plays in internal and external accountability.

The first focuses on how the Centre can ensure that government is more joined-up through the Business Plans.

Recommendation 7:

The Centre should adopt more formal mechanisms to support join-up between departments. We recommend that No.10 set up a forum of senior officials from the departments to promote a 'whole of government' view in business planning and to act to resolve dependency and joint working issues.

How to create 'joined up government' is a persistent issue in the UK, reinforced by structural departmental silos and accountability mechanisms. Whilst the initial test for Business Plans was to divide up the Programme for Government between departments, going forward the challenge will be to integrate and join up the implementation of these and other new reforms across government.

Currently, amendments to the Business Plans are developed in departmental silos and are approved by the Centre without much cross-departmental visibility. Similarly, any disputes or conflicting priorities between departments are dealt with via bilateral discussions with the Centre. This siloed approach can lead to confused internal accountabilities and can feel unfair to departments who have to publicly mark actions as overdue due knock-on impacts from the prioritisation of other departments.

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[35] See http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/business-plan-quarterly-data-summary for further details on the Quarterly Data Summaries

We recommend that the Centre set up and support a forum of senior representatives from departments to promote collaborative and joined up working. This group's remit should include:

- Whole of government planning: The group should ensure that amendments and additions to the Business Plans are done with a 'whole of government' view in mind. The group should consider what the government-wide impact of any new reforms are and how they can best be managed across departments
- Joint working and collaboration: Initially there were some limited references to joint actions within the Business Plans.[36] However, these were almost entirely stripped out during the May 2011 refresh as it was thought that they were contrary to principle of having a clear single point of accountability for each action. Yet, as many aspects of government business do cross departmental boundaries, there are advantages in having some way of managing these cross-cutting issues. A cross-cutting group should enable clear communication of different departmental priorities and act as a forum where any issues or conflicts arising from differences between departments or inadvertent knock-on effects can be resolved.
- Continual improvement of the Business Plans: Bringing together this group of officials enables best practice to be shared and common issues to be raised. This group should use its expertise and experiences to help refine the Business Plans and the supporting processes.

A second key role the Centre should play is in driving up the quality of the information made available to the public. This spans both internal and external accountability, as both mechanisms are dependent on the quality of the information provided.

Recommendation 8:

The Centre should provide a final layer of quality assurance for the Business Plans. Departments should be the primary drivers of quality, but No.10 should ensure that all the actions and overdue explanations are of sufficient quality and will be understandable to the public.

This does not mean an extensive or heavy-duty approach to quality assurance by the Centre. This would be impractical as the Centre does not have the capacity to scrutinise each action and status. Instead, it is right that departments should take responsibility for ensuring that their updates are accurate and as comprehensive as possible.

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[36] For example, initially DCLG & BIS each had an action stating "Evaluate RDA functions and assets, as part of local growth White Paper" in which DCLG was listed as the lead department with BIS supporting the process. See http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/transparency/srp/view-srp/44/92 and http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/transparency/srp/view-srp/36/37

However, there is a role for the Centre in setting out the general expectations for Business Plan reporting. This should include some basics on how departments should report against their SRP actions. For instance, it should not be possible for a department to pass a deadline on an SRP action and not mark it as 'overdue' (see Annex 1for recent examples) or fail to provide an explanation accounting for why the deadline has been missed. Similarly, the Centre should ensure that departments do not include duplicated or repeated actions within SRPs (see http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/transparency/srp/view-srp/42/82

Annex 2 for recent examples). As well as being confusing to the public, they make it difficult to do accurate analysis of how the department is performing against its objectives

The Centre also has a role in ensuring that the Business Plan information being published is as clear and comprehensive as possible. It should ensure that SRP actions and explanations are understandable to the outside public and do not include acronyms of internal jargon. The explanations for overdue SRP actions should provide a clear account of why the deadline has been missed and what steps the department is taking to rectify this. Currently there are too many 'explanations' within the monthly implementations updates which do not really meet either of these criteria. (See Annex 3 for examples.)

As well as ensuring that the content is accurate, the Centre can support both internal and external accountability by ensuring that the data in the Business Plans is easy to access and analyse.

Recommendation 9:

The Centre should make sure that the information in the Business Plans is easy to use and compare. This includes both ensuring that the content of the Business Plans is clear and standardised where possible and publishing the information in a format that is easy to analyse.

The Centre should also look at ways of making the information within the Business Plans as standardised and comparable as possible. The Centre made good steps in this regard with some of the common areas of spend data contained within the Quarterly Data Summaries, however it should consider whether it is possible to standardise the level of detail within the SRP actions too. Currently, SRP actions range from the introduction of major bills or new bodies, to individual appointments of personnel or trips by ministers. As such, any attempt to meaningfully analyse the progress of departments, or create cross-departmental comparisons is difficult.

The Centre should also improve the way that the Business Plans are published to make it easier for the public to use and analyse the information they contain. Though the Quarterly Data Summaries are published in a standardised and machine readable format, most of the other Business Plan information is not as accessible. The No.10 Transparency site could easily include

a link to the hidden API feed sitting behind this online database[37] and offer the public the option of downloading the data as a CSV file or spreadsheet[38]. The Monthly Implementation Updates from departments are currently published as PDF documents, which make them very difficult to extract data from or analyse in any systematic or automated fashion. We would strongly recommend that these be published in a machine readable format.

One of the biggest problems that we experienced when trying to use and analyse the SRP data was the lack of stable reference ID for each action.[39] This makes it impossible to track the status of actions over time without a huge amount of manual checking as the text of the actions were frequently refined or amended, leaving the process open to a greater risk of human error. The lack of reference IDs also made it very tricky to accurately join up the actions from the main No.10 Transparency site and the information provided in the Monthly Implementation Updates as text used to describe actions was not always consistent between the two sources. Consequently we believe that it is vital that the Centre should ensure that each SRP action is assigned a stable and unique identifying reference. It should also ensure that this reference is used consistently in all material referring to that individual SRP action to enable information on that action to be easily found and monitored.

Our fourth recommendation supports the critical role the Centre plays in managing the relationship between internal accountability and external accountability to the public. These two forms of accountability can, if managed well, act to reinforce each other. However, for this to happen, the Centre needs to take the lead in ensuring that communication and understanding of each of the accountability roles is as clear as possible.

One key improvement that could be made in this respect is for the Centre to ensure that the public have a better visibility of the existing internal accountability mechanisms.

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[37] APIs (application programming interfaces) act as an interface between different software programs. In the case of the Business Plans, the API feeds (e.g. http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/transparency/api/org-srp/37 for DfE's Business Plan) allow the public to access the data directly from the No. 10 website in a machine readable format.

[38] In keeping with our recommendations in the Institute's *System Error* report, we would encourage No.10 to publish the Business Plan in an open document format such as CSV [comma separated variable] or as an open source software spreadsheet.

[39] Though the API feed does have reference numbers by each action, these are not apparently not stable with multiple reference IDs being used for the same action whilst completely new actions have replaced the old text against other existing reference numbers. For example the DH action "Co-design and establish pilots to provide payments based on outcomes to providers to help individuals achieve sustained recovery from drug dependency" changed API reference number from 1675 to 3228 between June and July 2011.

> **Recommendation 10:**
>
> **The Centre should ensure that internal accountability mechanisms are made as transparent as possible**. Whilst the internal accountability process has been publicly referenced, more could be done to make the public aware of these mechanisms. The process would gain more public credibility if it was clear when departments were being called to account internally and what remedial actions were put in place.

Currently, whilst the existence of internal accountability mechanisms have been discussed in the public domain[40], no information is made public about how they have been used to date or what action the Centre has taken when departments have failed to meet their obligations.

We believe it would be helpful for the Centre to make these internal mechanisms more transparent. This would enable the public to make an informed judgement about how well the government has responded to delays or changes in plans by departments, further equipping them to call the government to account.

As a minimum, we recommend that the Centre clearly publishes information about the internal accountability processes alongside the Business Plan data. This should set out what the internal accountability processes are and any general guidelines that exist on what triggers an intervention by the Centre[41].

We would also recommend that the Centre should make public when a department has been subject to an escalation, why the escalation occurred and what the resolution of the situation is. We recognise that this is likely to be sensitive or uncomfortable for the ministers involved. However, if the government is serious about using transparency as a public accountability tool, then it cannot restrict what is published to only the areas with which it feels comfortable. Showing that ministers are prepared to be held to account transparently would greatly increase the credibility of the process and would be consistent with the Prime Minister's aspiration to "*rip off that cloak of secrecy and extend transparency as far and as wide as possible*"[42] and make the current government "*one of the most open and transparent in the world*".[43]

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[40] For example – see comments by Oliver Letwin at PASC 12/01/11
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpubadm/c693-i/c69301.htm
[41] The Institute does not believe it is necessarily helpful to have strict or rigid criteria for what triggers an internal escalation, but does believe it would be helpful to set out some general principles, along the lines of those already described by ministers, such as escalations will be triggered if a department is persistently late etc.
[42] PM's podcast on Transparency 29/05/10 http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-podcast-on-transparency/
[43] PM's podcast on Transparency 29/05/10 http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-podcast-on-transparency/

6. Conclusions and summary of recommendations

One year in, the Business Plans are still evolving. There is a stable process up and running between departments and the centre. The principles of transparency and allowing those inside and outside of government to track progress are firmly embedded. Information is being published and is starting to be used, if primarily internally, to help drive the performance of government.

But there is still a lot of work still to do to make the Business Plans into an effective and durable tool. There is still an element of ambiguity over the scope and purpose of the Business Plans which makes it difficult for those inside and outside of government to use them properly. Internal accountability mechanisms are in place but as there has been limited interest in the Business Plans from the public or intermediaries, external accountability mechanisms are not yet fully working. There are also a number of basic improvements that can be made to publication of the Business Plans and their supporting processes.

This paper has set out some practical recommendations on how these issues can be addressed, ranging from the top level questions on scope, to technicalities around publication. However, this is by no means an exhaustive or comprehensive set of solutions. Instead, we hope that these will provide direction and some suggestions for the next stage of the Business Plans' evolution.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:
The Business Plans should have a clear scope and narrative. We recommend that the Business Plans focus solely on the Government's reform agenda. The different sections of the Business Plans should also be clearly linked, enabling each reform to be tracked from its original outline in the Programme for Government through to the related impact indicator.

Recommendation 2:
The government should articulate how the Business Plans fit into the wider accountability landscape, in particular with respect to how departments are held to account for areas outside of reform.

Recommendation 3:

There should be one place on the No.10 website which brings together all the Business Plan information in an easily accessible and useable format. This includes the Structural Reform Plans and monthly overdue explanations, the Quarterly Data Summaries, along with other input and impact indicators.

Recommendation 4:

The Business Plans should be fully integrated with the information that departments use to manage themselves. They should in effect be a high level cut of the department's own planning tools, focusing specifically on the areas of reform.

Recommendation 5:

The refresh and planning cycle should be regularised and all Departmental Boards should sign-off any changes to their Business Plans. Having a clear opportunity to review and approve the Business Plans will help drive a greater sense of ownership by the Board.

Recommendation 6:

More frequent refresh opportunities should be considered to prevent a split between the publically reported plans and those used internally by departments.

Recommendation 7:

The Centre should adopt more formal mechanisms to support join-up between departments. We recommend that No.10 set up a forum of senior officials from the departments to promote a 'whole of government' view in business planning and to act to resolve dependency and joint working issues.

Recommendation 8:

The Centre should provide a final layer of quality assurance for the Business Plans. Departments should be the primary drivers of quality, but No.10 should ensure that all the actions and overdue explanations are of sufficient quality and will be understandable to the public.

Recommendation 9:

The Centre should make sure that the information in the Business Plans is easy to use and compare. This includes both ensuring that the content of the Business Plans is clear and standardised where possible and publishing the information in a format that is easy to analyse.

Recommendation 10:

The Centre should ensure that internal accountability mechanisms are made as transparent as possible. Whilst the internal accountability process has been publicly referenced, more could be done to make the public aware of these mechanisms. The process would gain more public credibility if it was clear when departments were being called to account internally and what remedial actions were put in place.

Annexes

Annex 1

Overdue actions not marked as overdue:
Screenshots taken of the No.10 website on 24/10/11

http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/transparency/srp/view-srp/1/71

http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/transparency/srp/view-srp/42/82

Annex 2

Examples of duplicated actions:

Screenshots taken of the No.10 website on 24/10/11

1.3 Take forward restructuring activities as set out in the SDSR [Hide -]

	Start	End	Status
1.3 Take forward restructuring activities as set out in the SDSR			
1.3.i. Implement key restructuring activities in the Royal Navy, including:			
1.3.i.a. Remove the Royal Navy component of the Joint Harrier Force from service	Nov 2010	Apr 2011	Completed
1.3.i.b. Decommission HMS Ark Royal	Nov 2010	Apr 2011	Completed
1.3.i.c. Reduce by four the number of frigates	Nov 2010	Apr 2011	Completed
1.3.i.d. Place at extended readiness a landing and command ship	Apr 2011	Mar 2012	In progress
1.3.i.e. Decommission one Bay-class amphibious support ship	Apr 2011	Mar 2012	Completed
1.3.i.f. Reduce the number of Royal Navy Personnel by around 5,000	Apr 2011	Apr 2015	In progress

1.6 Take forward restructuring activities as set out in the SDSR [Hide -]

	Start	End	Status
1.6 Take forward restructuring activities as set out in the SDSR			
1.6.i.a. Remove the Royal Navy component of the Joint Harrier Force from service			Completed
1.6.i. Implement key restructuring activities in the Royal Navy, including:			
1.6.i.b. Decommission HMS Ark Royal			Completed
1.6.i.c.Reduce by four the number of frigates			Completed
1.6.i.d. Place at extended readiness a landing and command ship		Mar 2012	In progress
1.6.i.e. Decommission one Bay-class amphibious support ship			Completed
1.6.i.f. Reduce the number of Royal Navy Personnel by around 5,000			

http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/transparency/srp/view-srp/35

Annex 3

Recent examples of 'explanations' which do not explain why an action is overdue or the steps being taken to rectify the situation:

(3) Explanation of missed deadlines

In September 2011, the Home Office missed the following deadlines:

Deadline missed	Status	Comments
2.3 (viii) Analyse consultation responses and work with policing partners and others to implement the outcomes of consultation, if applicable	Not complete	The consultation closed on 28th June. We are currently considering the responses.
3.4 (vii) Analyse consultation responses and draft legislation (Changes to strengthen and extend	Not complete	The consultation closed on 8th August and we have received in the region of 60 responses with

http://www.number10.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/HO-SRP-Sep-update.pdf

(3) Explanation of missed and delayed deadlines

In September 2011, DCLG missed the following deadlines:

Deadline missed	Reason
4.7(vi) Consult on Community Infrastructure Levy proposals	We have set out our commitment to consult on our plans to reform the Community Infrastructure Levy by placing control over a meaningful proportion of the funds raised from new development within an area with the representatives of that community. We will publish the consultation, and the draft amendment regulations that would implement the proposals that we have set out in the Localism Bill, on 10 October. The consultation ends on 30 December.

http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/transparency/srp/view-srp/36/41

(4) The status of missed deadlines from previous reports is:

Deadline Missed	Status	Comments
1.9 (i) Work with UN partners to achieve significant progress towards an intermediate model for UN Security Council reform (July 2011)	Still not complete	The UK continues to work with international partners at the UN on Security Council reform.
5.3 (ii) Publish a Green Paper on how intelligence is treated in the full range of judicial proceedings (end July 2011)	Still not complete	We expect publication to be later in 2011.

http://www.number10.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/FCO-Sep-update.pdf

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