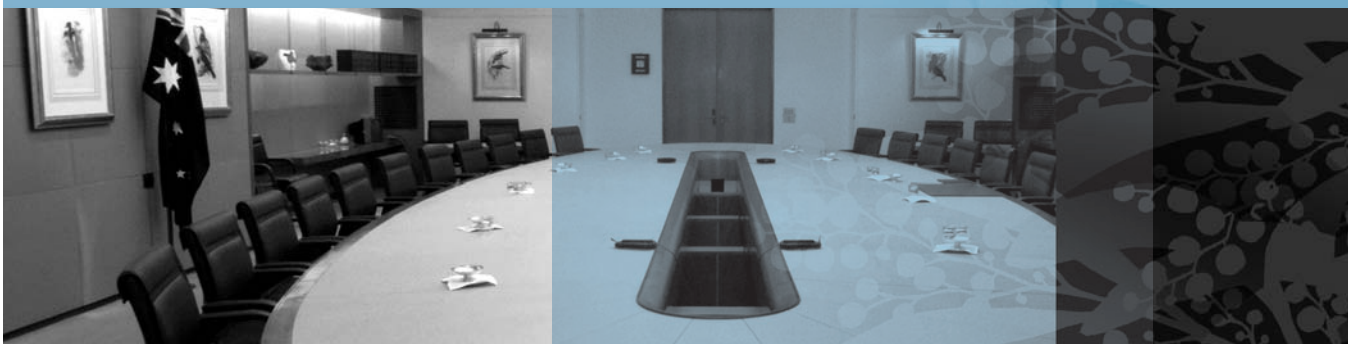


**CABINET IMPLEMENTATION UNIT  
SPECIAL ARTICLE**



# CABINET IMPLEMENTATION UNIT



*I think one of the things we lack in the public service both at a Commonwealth and at state level is a consolidated focus on the efficient and timely and sympathetic delivery of services. We tend to look at service delivery as an afterthought rather than as a policy priority ...*

*Prime Minister the Hon. John Howard MP*

ADDRESSING A PRESS CONFERENCE  
CANBERRA, 22 OCTOBER 2004

The Cabinet Implementation Unit (CIU) was established in late 2003 to make the delivery of government policy decisions a priority. Our mission statement gives our key task as 'ensuring the committed and effective delivery of key government decisions'. In practice, this means we promote early and effective planning for policy delivery, and we follow up to see that decisions are being carried out on time and on budget.

This special article aims to give our readers a deeper understanding of how the department is helping to ensure the implementation of key government decisions and improve delivery of programmes and services to the Australian community.

## WHY A CABINET IMPLEMENTATION UNIT?

The Cabinet is the apex of Australian Government decision making. It sets and monitors the direction of government, takes the most important decisions on policies and budgets, and resolves potential conflicts between portfolios and their objectives.

However, effective policy implementation does not follow automatically from Cabinet decisions. Gaps emerge between expected and actual results. Stakeholders, implementers and commentators might have differing ideas about a policy's purpose, outcomes and timing, perhaps because these were not fully articulated at the outset. Sometimes government priorities change, or more is learned about the policy problem as implementation proceeds. And real-world implementation always tests the underlying logic of policy decisions, the choice of policy instruments and the initial allocation of resources.

Public administrators have always faced such problems, but the challenge has never been greater than it is now. Citizens set high standards for government; they expect administrators to deploy ever-increasing technical capacity to solve problems that cross boundaries within and between Australia's governments, between the public and private sectors, and between nations.

The addition of the CIU to the Australian Government's policy-making support structures is intended to meet this challenge. The Cabinet is the appropriate forum for top-level follow-up and refinement of key government initiatives. It is essential that the Cabinet be properly informed of possible implementation problems when it decides government policy, and in order to mediate expectations it must continuously monitor the delivery of its key initiatives, testing policy assumptions against reality. The CIU has been created at this policy-making gateway, with a clear focus on delivery and a capacity to monitor implementation.

By using the Cabinet process, the CIU aims to produce a sharper focus on implementation and delivery throughout the Australian Public Service (APS). This, along with our education and review work, tries to meet the challenge of further improving the service provided by the APS to the Australian public. The target was set by the Secretary in November 2004, in his speech 'Plan and Deliver: Avoiding Bureaucratic Hold-up':



I want an Australian Public Service that is admired as much for its ability to deliver policy as for its capacity to develop it ... I want public servants with a fire in the belly about managing projects and delivering programmes on budget, on time, to the highest quality standards.

## HOW THE CIU WORKS

The CIU is staffed by about ten people experienced in policy and programme areas, and usually includes other staff seconded from relevant programme delivery agencies. The unit does not evaluate programme outcomes or duplicate the work of other agencies. Rather, it collaborates with agencies to systematically identify implementation challenges at an early stage, develop strategies to overcome them, provide follow-up support, and monitor progress against milestones, timelines and budgets.

The CIU's activities fall into three main categories: better information for decision making; follow-up of Cabinet decisions; and promotion of better practice across the APS.

### BETTER INFORMATION FOR DECISION MAKING

The CIU ensures that the Cabinet has enough high-quality information about implementation when it considers new policy proposals.

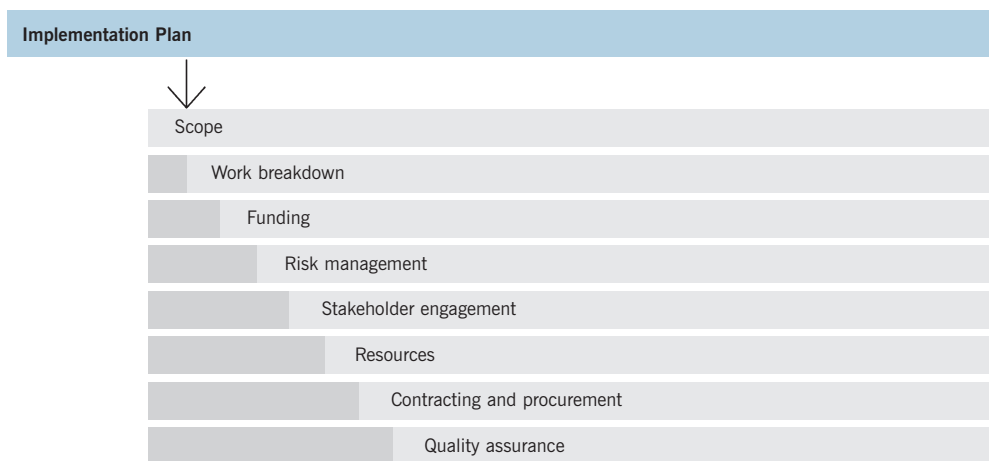
Moderate-risk to high-risk proposals coming before the Cabinet must now address the scope, milestones, risks, impacts and consultation arrangements for implementation and delivery in a standard way. Proposals must answer set questions:

- Measures of success—What criteria will be used to assess whether the programme or proposal has fulfilled its objective?
- Consultation arrangements—What parties will contribute to implementation, and are they being consulted?
- Key implementation milestones or dates—What are the key progress points?
- Risks and risk management—What are the risks that could affect implementation, and how will they be managed?

The discipline imposed by this method improves communications between stakeholder organisations, policy advisers and policy implementers from the outset.

After the Cabinet adopts a new policy proposal, a detailed implementation plan is developed and lodged with the CIU. The plan (see Figure 10) uses a project management framework to codify and examine how inputs and outputs are linked to policy objectives, exposes the assumptions that have been made in policy development, makes the risks clear, and spells out tangible intermediate and final results. To support the process, the CIU has developed guidelines for implementation planning, which are available on the department's website.

**FIGURE 10** Implementation plans



## FOLLOW-UP OF CABINET DECISIONS

Initiatives are selected for monitoring by the CIU if they are urgent or sensitive; involve significant new technology or service delivery mechanisms, or cross-portfolio or Commonwealth–state implementation or delivery; or for other reasons are considered to be moderate-risk or high-risk proposals.

The milestones and target dates in the implementation plan become the baseline for monitoring the project and for informing the Prime Minister and Cabinet about progress. Every three months, the CIU provides a summary report, the core of which is a table showing green, amber or red 'traffic lights' against the initiative and the measures within it (see Figure 11). Most initiatives begin with green lights and stay that way; for others, an amber light signifies a watching brief or need for early intervention; the red light flags the few that require significant and immediate remedial action to ensure on-time delivery. Short comments in the report draw attention to issues of interest, especially in relation to the amber- or red-lighted measures. The report also gives a short summary of important milestones expected in the next quarter.

At the end of June 2005, the CIU was monitoring 51 major policy initiatives, comprising approximately 230 individual measures.

**FIGURE 1.1** Summary Cabinet Implementation Unit report to the Prime Minister and Cabinet

	Measure / Policy Title by Portfolio	Next Quarter Milestone/s	Comments and Issues
<b>DEPARTMENT</b>			
<b>1</b>	<b>Package 1</b>		
<b>1.1</b>	<b>Measure</b>	Oct 04. Milestone 1 Dec 04. Milestone 2	xxxxx
<b>1.2</b>	<b>Measure</b>	Nov. Milestone 1	xxxxxx
<b>2</b>	<b>Package 2</b>		
<b>2.1</b>	<b>Measure</b>	Dec 04. Milestone	At risk due to .....
<b>2.2</b>	<b>Measure</b>	Nov 04. Milestone 1 Milestone 2 Milestone 3	At serious risk due to .....
<b>2.3</b>	<b>Measure</b>	Nil.	Nil.
<p><b>Red = highly problematic – requires urgent and decisive action</b>  <b>Amber = problematic – requires attention to ensure implementation is on track and/or significant risks emerging</b>  <b>Green = Good - on track or requires only minor refinement</b></p>			

**PROMOTION OF BETTER IMPLEMENTATION ACROSS THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE**

The CIU’s third critical task is to identify and support best practice in project management and programme implementation to support an evolving culture of good implementation. The long-term aim is broad and consistent capacity across departments to produce high-quality delivery. To this end, the unit provides guidance on individual implementation plans and Cabinet submissions; leads regular ‘community of practice’ gatherings, with speakers on various implementation and project management matters; and provides speakers and presentations to a wide range of forums and organisations.

The unit has begun work with the Australian National Audit Office to develop a better practice guide to the implementation of Australian Government policy. We are also actively involved in the development of a whole-of-government website to help public servants understand how to work across the departments and agencies that make up the Australian Government. The site, which will be updated regularly, will give practical tips, case studies, tools and directories.

## OUR FIRST EIGHTEEN MONTHS

The CIU's systems for providing implementation assessments to the Cabinet at the decision-making stage and full implementation plans for adopted initiatives have been well accepted. This information is now delivered routinely, forming a basis for better decision making and follow-up.

As more initiatives have been brought into the monitoring system, the unit's quarterly reports to the Prime Minister and Cabinet have shown that, not surprisingly, most government initiatives are implemented within expectations. The report system, with its amber and red traffic lights for potential problems, has been an effective way to bring these items forward from the large body of current government initiatives so that they can receive early attention, and ensure effective implementation.

The CIU sees increasing acceptance across Australian Government agencies of the need for implementation planning as well as monitoring. More agencies are recognising the value of building systems to support planning and to ensure that staff are trained and accredited in project management. The unit's active promotion of better practice principles encourages this capability development.

In 2005–06, the unit will continue to develop its capacity to assist and advise agencies with their implementation planning, and work with them to identify, assess and manage the risks of implementation of initiatives already under way.