

A stylized, modern illustration of a building complex. The architecture features clean lines, flat surfaces, and a color palette of deep blues, vibrant reds, and light beige. In the background, a large, bright sun with a lens flare effect is positioned in the upper center. The foreground shows a series of terraced walkways and platforms. The overall style is graphic and contemporary.

The Role of Senior Responsible Owners in UK Major Government Programmes



JO BRADSHAW

Experience leading major UK Government Transformation Programmes

CURRENT

HM Revenue & Customs

Director & SRO Tax Compliance Transformation Programmes

PREVIOUS

Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

SRO for the Biosecurity, Borders & Trade Programme

EARLIER PROGRAMME / PORTFOLIO DIRECTOR ROLES

Department for Work and Pensions • Crown Commercial Service • Home Office

Major transformation delivery across several government departments

An SRO is the single senior leader accountable for delivery

SRO

SENIOR RESPONSIBLE OWNER

Single senior leader
personally accountable

A Senior Responsible Owner is the single senior leader personally accountable for delivering a project or programme.

- 01 The model applies to projects and programmes of different sizes.

- 02 SROs for the largest programmes can be called to account by Parliament.

**Accountability is concentrated in the SRO.
Delivery remains distributed across the organisation and its partners.**

Four characteristics define the UK SRO model

01

Named Accountability

- One senior leader owns objectives, the business case and benefits
- Delegation changes who does the work—not who is accountable

02

System Leadership

- Aligns political intent, organisational authority and professional delivery
- Makes trade-offs and escalates barriers the programme cannot resolve

03

Transparency & Scrutiny

- Appointment and responsibilities are visible
- Reports honestly, uses assurance and answers for progress and setbacks

04

Outcomes & Public Value

- Maintains the link from policy intent to implementation and benefits
- Protects viability, value for money and evaluation through the lifecycle

Accountability is concentrated in the SRO; delivery remains distributed across the organisation and its partners.

SROs are accountable for successful delivery

Ministers set policy; SROs implement; Accounting Officers protect public-money standards.

PARLIAMENT

MINISTER

RESPONSIBLE FOR POLICY

- Sets policy intent, outcomes and political priorities
- Makes and defends departmental decisions
- Accounts to Parliament for the department's actions

Minister ↔ SRO

policy intent • feasibility advice

SRO

PERSONALLY ACCOUNTABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- Delivers objectives and outcomes; owns the business case
- Owns governance, risk, assurance and benefits
- Reports honestly; escalates unresolved risks or viability concerns
- GMPP SROs can be called to account by Parliament

ACCOUNTING OFFICER

PERSONALLY ACCOUNTABLE FOR STEWARDSHIP

- Safeguards regularity, propriety, value for money and feasibility
- Ensures authority, resources and oversight are in place
- Accounts to Parliament for public money

SRO ↔ Accounting Officer

appointment • oversight • resources • escalation

The Accounting Officer's oversight supports—and does not replace—the SRO's personal accountability for delivery.

The SRO owns the outcome; the Programme Director leads delivery

The SRO delegates management — but not accountability

SRO

ACCOUNTABLE OWNER • outcomes, viability and strategic choices

PRIMARY ROLE

Sets the intended outcomes, strategic direction, business-case boundaries and delivery tolerances.

OWNS

- Business case, benefits, governance and continuing viability
- Strategic stakeholders and the conditions for success

DECIDES & ANSWERS

Delegates within clear limits, makes strategic trade-offs and remains personally accountable for success.

&

PROGRAMME DIRECTOR

DELIVERY LEADER • plans, people and execution

PRIMARY ROLE

Leads the integrated programme, projects and business change needed to deliver those outcomes.

LEADS

- Plan, controls, risks, dependencies, resources and suppliers
- Multidisciplinary teams and organisational readiness for change

ACTS & ESCALATES

Acts within delegated authority, reports performance and escalates risks or decisions beyond those limits.

They operate as a pair: the SRO sets direction and holds accountability; the Programme Director turns it into controlled delivery.

An SRO appointment letter makes personal accountabilities explicit



The SRO is personally responsible for delivery—even where management and specialist work are delegated.

Example: Joanne Bradshaw, Defra Biosecurity, Borders and Trade Programme appointment letter, 15 August 2023. GOV.UK.

The SRO role is consistent in accountability—not uniform in shape



WHO CAN BE AN SRO?

Background follows the outcomes

- A senior project-delivery professional
- A policy leader shaping reform
- An operational leader who will realise the benefits
- Typically, a senior leader from the business area affected

QUALITIES THAT MATTER

Authority alone is not enough

- Strategic judgement and clear decision-making
- Systems leadership and coalition-building
- Courage to surface uncertainty, escalate or reset
- Openness, integrity and focus on benefits and outcomes

DEVELOPMENT & SUPPORT

Capability is built, assessed and sustained

- Role-specific learning – Major Projects Leadership Academy / SRO Fundamentals
- Ongoing CPD and specialist learning where the programme demands it

**Programme context determines the time commitment and leadership profile.
Capability and support must match the challenge.**

How the SRO role works in practice

A recurring leadership rhythm, sharpened by four judgement calls.

RECURRING LEADERSHIP RHYTHM

	SRO ACTION	EVIDENCE / FORUM
Set direction	Translate intent into outcomes and tolerances	Strategy and business-case refresh
Create grip	Focus evidence on the decisions that matter	Board, milestones, risks and dependencies
Unblock delivery	Resolve issues beyond the team’s authority	Escalation, sponsorship and coalition-building
Hold confidence	Invite challenge and act on assurance	Independent review, confidence and audit
Sustain outcomes	Prepare the organisation and track benefits	Transition, ownership and evaluation

JUDGEMENT CALLS

The moments that test the role

- Go deep**
Test reality without displacing the delivery leader / team.
- Escalate**
Escalate early when risks or decisions exceed the programme’s authority.
- Reset**
Reset scope or plan when evidence shows delivery is no longer viable.
- Stay credible**
Be open about uncertainty while sustaining confidence and pace.

The SRO applies judgement throughout the programme lifecycle to protect delivery and public value.

Benefits of the Model

Why concentrate accountability in one senior leader?

01 Clarity

A visible owner for outcomes, trade-offs and the integrity of the business case.

02 Integration

A single point able to connect policy, operations, finance, digital, commercial and people.

03 Escalation Power

Seniority provides access to decisions beyond the programme's formal authority.

04 Institutional Learning

Named ownership strengthens transparency, appointment discipline and leadership development.



The model's greatest benefit is also a key risk: much depends on the authority, capacity and continuity of one role-holder.

Challenges & critical success factors

Leadership conditions: four challenges that must be designed for at the outset.

CHALLENGES SROs FACE	→	CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS
01 Capacity & resilience — A demanding role can exceed the time and stamina available.		Protected time & support — Set a realistic span, protect time, build resilience and provide coaching and peer support.
02 Authority & political landscape — Accountability can outstrip control as priorities and dependencies shift.		Mandate, access & judgement — Make authority explicit, preserve senior access and use clear escalation routes.
03 SRO–Programme Director relationship — Blurred boundaries or weak trust slow decisions and obscure delivery risk.		A strong leadership pairing — Separate outcome accountability from day-to-day delivery; share facts, build trust and speak candidly.
04 Cross-government delivery — No single department controls every dependency; priorities, incentives and accountabilities may diverge.		Shared mandate & joint governance — Agree outcomes, decision rights, information and escalation across departments.

The SRO needs the authority and relationships to lead across organisational boundaries.

Challenges & critical success factors

Sustaining outcomes: three challenges that continue beyond programme delivery.

CHALLENGES SROs FACE	→	CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS
05 Turnover & continuity — Leadership changes weaken memory, relationships and personal commitment.		Continuity by design — Plan tenure and succession; preserve decisions, rationale and stakeholder relationships.
06 Benefits delivered years later — Value may emerge long after delivery, when programme ownership has moved on.		Enduring benefits ownership — Name business owners, set baselines and track benefits beyond programme closure.
07 Assurance without learning — Reviews can become compliance events rather than sources of insight.		Learning-led assurance — Use evidence, honest challenge and rapid follow-through to adapt the programme.

Success is not a heroic individual effort: it is a deliberately designed leadership system.

Questions?

Thank you

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