



National Audit Office

Comptroller and Auditor General
Sir Amyas Morse KCB

Meg Hillier MP
Chair
Committee of Public Accounts
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Helping the nation spend wisely

Telephone [REDACTED]
Facsimile [REDACTED]
Email [REDACTED]

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MINISTERIAL DIRECTION: INTRODUCTION OF T LEVELS

As you may have seen, the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Education, Jonathan Slater, has sought and received a ministerial direction which instructs the Department to begin T levels in 2020.

By way of background, the government plans that T levels will be on a par with A levels and provide young people with a choice between technical and academic education after the age of 16. The Department plans that the first three T level courses (in construction, digital, and education & childcare) will be first taught from September 2020. It intends to roll out further courses in stages from 2021, to cover sectors such as finance & accounting, engineering & manufacturing, and creative & design. T levels are intended to provide young people with: a mix of technical knowledge and practical skills specific to their chosen industry or occupation; an industry placement of at least 45 days; relevant maths, English and digital skills; and common workplace skills.

The direction was sought in line with the requirements set out by HM Treasury within Managing Public Money which states that if a minister decides to continue with a course that the Accounting Officer has advised against, the Accounting Officer should ask for a formal written direction to proceed. One of the grounds for seeking a ministerial direction is 'feasibility' – where there is a significant doubt about whether the proposal can be implemented accurately, sustainably, or to the intended timetable.

The Permanent Secretary stated in his letter to the Secretary of State on 17 May 2018 that it would be challenging to ensure that the first three T levels are ready to be taught from 2020 and beyond to a consistently high standard. The Permanent Secretary said that, given his requirement to consider the regularity, propriety, value for money and feasibility of public spending, he would advise deferring the start date to 2021 in order to mitigate the feasibility and consequential value for money risks.

In his letter of direction on 24 May 2018, the Secretary of State observed that he is able to draw on a wider range of considerations than the guidance to accounting officers, that he was convinced of the case to press ahead, and that none of the advice he has received had indicated that teaching from 2020 could not be achieved.

Managing Public Money requires the Accounting Officer to arrange for the existence of the direction to be published, no later than in the next report and accounts, unless the matter must be kept confidential. In this case the Department has published both letters on its website. The Department is also required to disclose

the existence of the ministerial direction as part of its governance statement in its next annual report and accounts.

The Permanent Secretary and the Secretary of State do not reference in their letters the regularity of proposed expenditure on T levels. The concept of regularity requires the Permanent Secretary to use public funds in compliance with the relevant legislation, delegated authorities and the guidance in Managing Public Money. I have no concerns at present that the Department is using public funds irregularly in delivering T levels. However I will monitor future spending and consider the potential for losses and fruitless payments arising from T levels as part of my audits of the Department.

I have asked my staff to discuss with departmental officials the reasons for the Permanent Secretary seeking the ministerial direction, and the plans and risk management arrangements in place to introduce T levels from 2020. I will then be in a position to decide whether I should undertake any further work on this now.

Should you wish to ask Jonathan Slater about this matter, he will next appear before the Committee on 25 June to give evidence on Ofsted's inspection of schools.



AMYAS C E MORSE