

BEYOND APPROVAL AMNESIA

Benefits Get Forgotten After Approval Because Governance Was Built to Fund Delivery — Not Govern Value

A 2007 reflection on why the business case wins capital but loses its authority during delivery



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“A benefit forgotten after approval is usually a decision forgotten at the moment it mattered.”

1. The Benefit That Disappeared at Approval

At the investment committee, the benefit has a name, a number, an owner and a date. It appears on page twelve of the business case: £7.6 million over three years from standardising work across five divisions. The sponsor speaks to it. Finance challenges it. The committee reduces it by 15 per cent and approves the programme.

Nine months later, the figure remains in the original paper, but nowhere else. The design authority is resolving interfaces. The programme board is watching milestones and expenditure. Divisional directors are negotiating local exceptions. The supposed benefit owner attends an operational review but has no authority over the five budgets from which the savings must come.

Nothing dramatic has happened. The benefit has simply passed from the one organisational moment in which it was essential – securing funding – into a delivery system that has no natural place for it.

This pattern persists because benefits are treated as arguments for entry, not obligations throughout the investment. Organisations write them to cross the approval threshold, then govern cost, scope and time as though value will be waiting at the end.

In 2007, this habit is increasingly expensive. Large systems programmes, shared-service initiatives and outsourcing arrangements are being approved on the promise of standardisation, consolidated purchasing and improved management information. Yet the machinery of programme control remains strongest around what can be delivered and paid for. Value is discussed intensely before approval and retrospectively after implementation. Between those points lies the quiet territory where it is actually created or lost.

2. The Business Case Is Asked to Sell and to Tell the Truth

The first structural force is built into the business case itself. It must support an honest decision under uncertainty, but it must also compete for scarce capital. Those purposes pull in opposite directions.

A cautious case admits that adoption may vary, that benefits depend on operational choices and that some value cannot yet be measured. A competitive case presents a clear return, a confident timetable and a persuasive total. The approval process often rewards

the latter, even while governance language asks for the former.

Sponsors learn the lesson quickly. If a proposed common service costs £14 million, a benefits case showing £10 million will struggle, however necessary the change may be. Add capacity savings, property reductions, purchasing leverage and avoided future costs, and the ratio becomes acceptable. Each claim can be defended. Together they create the appearance of one coherent, bankable result.

The case is not necessarily dishonest. It is conditional. The difficulty is that the conditions are scattered through assumptions, appendices and workshop notes while the total travels alone.

Benefits are forgotten after approval because the number survives more easily than the conditions that made the number credible.

Consider a composite portfolio programme consolidating four administrative centres. The approved case contains:

- £2.1 million from two lease exits.
- £3.4 million from 85 fewer posts.
- £1.2 million from common supplier arrangements.
- £900,000 from reduced error and rework.

By the time implementation begins, one lease has a break date eighteen months later than assumed, staff reductions require separate consultation, two divisions retain specialist suppliers, and no reliable error baseline exists. The programme still carries £7.6 million because formally revising it would reopen the approval discussion. What began as an estimate becomes a political commitment.

3. Approval Transfers Money, Not Accountability

The second force is the architecture of authority.

Funding approval releases capital to the programme. It does not automatically transfer authority over the operational decisions required for benefits. The programme director may control the implementation budget, supplier plan and delivery team. The benefit may depend on divisional budgets, property decisions, workforce plans, process compliance or contract renewals controlled elsewhere.

The word “owner” obscures this distinction. A name beside a benefit can mean at least four different things:

Apparent ownership	What the person can actually do	What remains elsewhere
Sponsor	Defend the investment and escalate	Change several operating budgets
Programme director	Deliver capability and coordinate change	Sustain behaviour after handover
Finance representative	Validate arithmetic and reconcile savings	Direct operational choices

Apparent ownership	What the person can actually do	What remains elsewhere
Business leader	Change one area's process or resources	Control cross-division dependencies

When ownership is weaker than the required authority, the benefit becomes a collective aspiration. Every participant can explain why another decision is needed first. The programme reports that operations must act; operations says the system is not stable; finance says savings cannot be recognised; the sponsor asks for a recovery plan. Activity increases while accountability disperses.

The programme structure intensifies this effect. Workstreams are organised around deliverables: systems, process, property, people, data. Benefits cross these boundaries. A saving from centre consolidation may require all five workstreams plus a budget decision after go-live. No single workstream plan contains the whole chain.

Thus the benefit is visible at the portfolio level but homeless in delivery.

4. The Control System Measures What It Can Intervene On

The third force is practical rather than ideological. Programme governance follows information that arrives regularly and permits action.

A late milestone can be recovered. A cost variance can be forecast. A defect count can be reduced. These measures fit monthly reporting because they have baselines, tolerances and named managers.

Benefits are harder. They may emerge after delivery, depend on behaviour, cross accounting periods or be influenced by changes outside the programme. Leaders therefore place them in a benefits register and review them less frequently. The register records the promise but often lacks the mechanism.

A typical monthly board pack might contain forty pages on delivery and one page on benefits. The benefit page shows original value, forecast value, owner and status. It does not show the decisions on which the forecast depends:

- whether local processes will actually be retired;
- whether released staff time will reduce budgets or absorb additional demand;
- whether a supplier contract can be terminated at the assumed date;
- whether managers will use common information rather than preserve local spreadsheets.

These are not measurement details. They are the substance of value. Yet they often appear in operational meetings outside programme governance, if they appear at all.

The result is a paradox. The programme can be tightly controlled and economically adrift. It knows exactly when the system will arrive but not whether the organisation is still prepared to do what makes the system worthwhile.

5. The Strong Defence of Delivery Discipline

There is a serious argument for keeping benefits at some distance from day-to-day programme management.

Programmes already struggle with complexity. If every strategic outcome, operational behaviour and long-term effect becomes a delivery measure, governance can become unmanageable. Benefits often take years to mature, while programme teams are temporary. Holding a programme director accountable for market conditions, staff behaviour or management decisions beyond the programme's control is neither fair nor useful.

Moreover, constant revision can weaken commitment. If every difficulty permits a lower benefit forecast, sponsors may use "learning" to excuse poor delivery. The original business case provides a stable reference against which performance can be judged.

This defence is correct about boundaries and wrong about separation. The programme should not own every outcome. It should own the integrity of the dependency chain while it exists: what capability is being delivered, what operational action is required, who has authority, and what evidence will show whether the chain is holding. Operations must own continuing results; the portfolio must own the investment decision. Stability should reside in the purpose and governance, not in numbers known to be obsolete.

The alternative to benefit amnesia is not to turn every board meeting into an economic seminar. It is to connect value to the decisions already being made.

6. Benefits Are Lost Through Ordinary Decisions

The most revealing feature of failed benefits is how rarely they disappear in a single moment. They erode through reasonable local choices.

One division receives permission to retain its process for six months. A lease exit moves to the next break point. A manager keeps experienced staff during a busy season. A data field remains optional to ease migration. A supplier extension reduces implementation risk. Each decision may be defensible on its own.

Together they can dismantle the business case.

This is why retrospective benefits reviews so often disappoint. They ask whether the promised value arrived after the causal chain has been altered dozens of times. The review finds a gap but cannot identify the decision at which intervention was still possible.

The proper unit of benefits management is therefore not the benefit statement. It is the value-changing decision.

A value-changing decision is any choice that alters one of four things:

- Magnitude: how much value remains possible.
- Timing: when the value can begin or how long it lasts.
- Confidence: how likely the causal chain is to hold.
- Classification: whether value will be cash, capacity, service, risk reduction or strategic enablement.

If the programme board approves a six-month local exception, it should see the effect on magnitude and timing. If operations retains released capacity, it should explicitly reclassify cash savings as service capacity. If a contract extension preserves delivery certainty but

delays supplier savings, the trade should be accepted as an investment decision, not buried as a procurement detail.

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7. Handover Is Too Late

Organisations commonly wait until handover to transfer benefits to the business. By then the transfer is largely ceremonial.

Operational leaders inherit targets built from assumptions they may not have accepted. Programme staff leave just as adoption problems become visible. Finance attempts to reconcile savings against budgets that were never adjusted. The sponsor's attention moves to the next investment.

The vocabulary of “handover” itself is misleading. Benefits cannot be passed like completed equipment. Operational ownership must be active before design choices harden and before local exceptions accumulate.

For the administrative-centre programme, a credible lifecycle would have required business leaders to decide before approval which centres would close, which budgets would reduce, which processes would become mandatory and how increased demand would affect staffing. During delivery, each exception would revise the benefit chain. Before go-live, budget changes and property actions would already be authorised. After go-live, the programme would supply evidence while operations sustained the result.

The principle is simple: the people who must realise the value should not first encounter their accountability when the programme is ready to leave.

8. From Approval Gate to Investment Conversation

The pattern persists because the organisation behaves as though approval is the main economic decision. It is not. Approval is the first decision in a sequence made under changing evidence.

A more honest portfolio rhythm would revisit four questions at defined points:

1. Is the strategic need still valid?
2. Is the causal path from delivery to value still credible?
3. Have the owners made the operational and financial decisions required?
4. Does the remaining value still justify the remaining cost and risk?

These questions turn the business case from a ticket of entry into a continuing investment argument. They also make revision legitimate. A lower forecast may reveal truth rather than failure. A changed benefit may reflect a deliberate choice to absorb demand rather than cut cost. A stopped programme may demonstrate governance working before further money is spent.

Finance has a role beyond validating the original arithmetic. It should distinguish cash from capacity, connect savings to budgets and challenge changes in timing. Programme leadership should maintain the causal chain and surface value-changing decisions.

Operations should own behaviour and resource choices. The sponsor should own the judgement to continue, reshape or stop. The portfolio board should ensure that no one can approve a change to the chain without seeing its effect on value.

9. What the Forgotten Benefit Reveals

When benefits vanish after approval, the usual explanation is weak discipline. That is too shallow. The behaviour is sustained by a system that concentrates scrutiny before funding, transfers capital without equivalent authority, organises delivery around outputs, and postpones operational ownership until handover.

People respond rationally to that system. Sponsors write benefits to win investment. Programmes manage what boards measure. Operations protects service continuity. Finance recognises only what reaches the accounts. The gap between intent and reality is produced by the design of governance, not by the moral weakness of individuals.

The remedy is not another register. It is to keep value inside the decisions that govern the work.

The business case should begin the conversation, not conclude it. Benefits should be re-tested whenever scope, adoption, resources, contracts or timing change. Owners should be defined by authority, not attendance. And the portfolio should judge remaining value against remaining investment throughout the lifecycle.

Then benefits cease to be promises written for a committee and become what they were always supposed to be: the reason the organisation continues to spend.