



## Discussion on Sponsorship

### Quality of sponsorship

Members expressed concern over the high turnover of people working in sponsorship roles. One Chief Executive commented that they had worked with 11 different departmental sponsors in his five years as CEO.

It was felt that due to the squeeze on resources, those working on sponsorship did not have enough time to truly engage with and understand ALBs. This could mean e.g. lack of attendance at board meetings which led to lack of understanding of operational context and poor advice to Ministers.

In addition, many of those working in sponsorship were often inexperienced in certain areas. For example, a lack of expertise on commercial issues has resulted in frustrations for one particular department's ALBs.

Sponsorship was felt to be more effective where those in the role were seen to be part of the department's talent. This could be both because of the individual's capability but also because they were better networked and more influential within the department, with more open and transparent communication.

One CEO felt that departments should be clear about objectives/responsibilities/accountabilities and communicate them more clearly to ALBs, which would then enable departments to hold them to account at a later stage. But sponsors didn't have the right experience to set objectives.

Members also questioned the extent to which guidance filters down from the centre to those who work in front-line sponsorship. It was felt that some of those in sponsorship roles were not themselves well informed about the department's business, and were not in a position to offer the necessary guidance, for example on political priorities.

Some members felt that with regard to sponsorship, a fundamental review is needed. With no disrespect to those who are working hard to contribute in sponsorship roles, one participant had doubts about the value of talking in terms of a 'sponsorship profession'. In the context of a radical Spending Review, the value of what is, in the end, an intermediary layer between Ministers/senior policy officials and delivery bodies must be questioned.

Inconsistencies in sponsorship models between different departments also become apparent throughout the discussion. It would be useful if Cabinet Office were able to give a view on inconsistencies across departments and how firmly guidance is enforced.

The term sponsorship was rather vague and Departments need to differentiate between policy sponsorship, governance sponsorship and "investment" or 'commercial' sponsorship (one person characterised this as "why have this body") – these required different skills. The Shareholder Executive were better equipped to carry out commercial type sponsorship but some bodies had experienced ShEx views being ignored by Departments.

Investment and financial strategy were equally important for many ALBs as policy, but there were few in departments that understood the issues. This could be very difficult and frustrating when decisions were vital for financial viability.

### Policy and delivery

Often, delivery bodies are not engaged at an early enough stage, and are therefore unable to discuss options and influence decisions.

One example detailed a discrepancy between Ministerial expectations and delivery, with some Ministers not being aware of/sharing the risk appetite of the delivery body. This was exacerbated by reluctance on the policy side to attend Board meetings, which would have given them an understanding of the delivery context.

Another Chief Executive commented that there was a marked reluctance to let delivery bodies attend briefing meetings with Ministers, which meant advice risked being inaccurate. Leaders with prior experience in other sectors cited this as being their biggest frustration with the role – they wanted to be able to sit down with Ministers and discuss options.

### Triennial Reviews

The majority of ALB leaders who responded find the Triennial Review process frustrating.

One Chief Executive commented that although the target for the duration of a review is 6 months, this is rarely met. Their organisation's Triennial Review has so far lasted 18 months and is still going. The norm in some departments seemed to have lengthened from 12 months at the start to 2 years now. Another Chief Executive mentioned that their TR had been going for two and a half years. The distraction for the individual and organisation, taken alongside the day job, was not to be underestimated.

It was also noted that the three-year cycle of reviews no longer fits with fixed term Parliaments.

The value of TRs as a routine process was seen as questionable.