



Review of the Senior Responsible Owner Role in the Major Projects and Programmes of Government

Version number: Final

Date: September 2009

Prepared by:

Rob Stephens

Bob Assirati

Jonathan Simcock

Protective Marking: Unclassified

MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

This review was carried out in response to concerns about the way the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) role is carried out. It focuses on major projects.

We have found that the SRO role is widely regarded as an essential innovation that increases the chances of project success. In our opinion the SROs of the largest projects in Government are generally up to the job although there is evidence that this was mostly due to their own efforts rather than any support mechanisms provided by their parent departments.

SROs appear to be selected using very ad hoc processes. There is on average a high turnover of SROs which represents a serious threat to the success of projects since continuity of leadership has been shown to correlate with higher delivery confidence. Most SROs have had no formal training and accreditation for their role.

We make a number of recommendations for Departments and SROs which we plan to incorporate into revised guidance once they have been agreed by the Project and Programme Management Council. In addition there are recommendations for OGC that we intend to incorporate into this year's work programme.

INTRODUCTION

- 1 The role of Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) was first proposed for IT-enabled projects in Section 2 of the McCartney Report¹ in 2000. Previously, it was often difficult to identify the individual with responsibility for the successful outcome of a major project. The role is now mandated across all government projects².
- 2 The role was proposed in the following terms:

The SRO is responsible for ensuring that the project or programme meets its overall objectives and delivers its projected benefits.

- 3 The definitive definition of the role appears on the OGC website³ and is based on the recommended approach in Managing Successful Programmes (MSP).

The SRO is the individual responsible for ensuring that a project or programme of change meets its objectives and delivers the projected benefits. They should be the owner of the overall business change that is being supported by the project. The SRO should ensure that the change maintains its business focus, has clear authority and that the context, including risks, is actively managed. This individual must be senior and must take personal responsibility for successful delivery of the project. They should be recognised as the owner throughout the organisation.

- 4 Over the years NAO and PAC reports and Gateway Reviews, together with feedback from suppliers have generated a perception that the SRO role is not working effectively. Comments relate to:
 - the role not being well understood
 - the wrong people being selected to act as SRO
 - SROs not having real accountability or business authority to resolve issues
 - SROs not having sufficient relevant delivery skills or experience
 - SROs not dedicating enough time to the role
 - lack of continuity in the role through the project life-cycle
 - lack of tools, guidance and development opportunities for SROs
 - lack of adequate supporting resources
- 5 In this review we have focussed on large complex projects. We carried out the review in two stages. Initially we looked at how the SRO role is undertaken on the largest projects – those in the Major Projects Portfolio (MPP)⁴. We studied information available through the quarterly MPP report and interviewed OGC staff who work with these projects as well as 12 of the SROs and other senior

¹ McCartney Report: [http://archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/e-envoy/reports-t/projects/\\$file/successful_it.pdf](http://archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/e-envoy/reports-t/projects/$file/successful_it.pdf)

² In this review the work 'project' includes both projects and programmes.

³ SRO Definition: http://www.ogc.gov.uk/User_roles_in_the_toolkit_senior_responsible_owner.asp

⁴ The term "SRO" is also used to describe those appointed by PMDU to lead the delivery of PSA targets. These SROs generally had no financial or line management control over the, often several, departments delivering the target. Unlike the delivery SRO role, the PSA SRO role was seen in a very positive career light. More work to identify the boundaries and attributes of these two breeds of SRO may be valuable.

Departmental managers. In the second stage we interviewed a further 8 SROs of High Risk projects lying outside the MPP list, and discussed our thoughts with PMDU, NSfG, the Defence Academy, and OGC colleagues. Whilst this is a small sample the results from interviewees were very consistent and we felt that the findings were robust.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The SRO Role

- 6 Across the major projects we looked at we were impressed by the commitment, confidence and understanding of the SROs. There was evidence that over the last year or so, less suitable SROs had been replaced on a number of the larger projects. We suspected that the MPP projects, in particular, had been subject to such scrutiny over the last year or two that most SRO capability issues had been resolved.
- 7 We found wide agreement that the SRO role was an essential one that contributes to establishing clear objectives and better decision making. Interviewees all understood the responsibilities of the SRO and most were aware of the description on the OGC website. The role was felt to be better understood and accepted than five years ago.
- 8 Some SROs expressed the view that the role is a lonely one and is not appropriately recognised by the Sponsoring Group for their project. In the case of the largest projects this is usually the organisation's Management Board. This lack of appreciation contributed to a feeling amongst some SROs that the role was something of a "poisoned chalice". That is; they could easily fail (to the potential detriment to their careers) whereas success was not widely recognised.

Recommendation: Departments should incorporate performance in the SRO role in individual performance targets. This will both legitimise the activity and provide an opportunity for good performance to be recognised.

- 9 Many felt that it is important for the SRO role to be firmly positioned in Professional Skills for Government (PSG) so that it is seen to lie in mainstream career paths. Indeed ideally the role itself should be much sought after – to the point that it might become a pre-requisite for staff destined for the top of the SCS, to demonstrate their competence in policy delivery.
- 10 In some cases the SRO regarded the role as being their day job since their main responsibility was to effect business change and the programme was the means to that end. Others allocated only a small percentage of their time to the programme, often using a full-time Programme Director to undertake components of the SRO role.
- 11 The SRO role is distinguished in MSP from that of the Programme Manager (an inward facing role responsible for detailed planning and tracking of delivery), but there is no reference in MSP to a Programme Director role. Where this latter role is used, usually on larger projects, it is generally the result of dividing the SRO role so that business owner undertakes the SRO role as a part time activity, working with a full time Programme Director skilled in delivery acting as their direct representative.

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- 12 On very large programmes this arrangement has become the norm and can work well if the Programme Director has sufficient credibility and is seen to be working with the full authority of the SRO. However, without demonstrable credibility in business as well as delivery matters, the Programme Director can struggle to perform SRO-type duties, to the detriment of the programme.
- 13 There is no “right” division of responsibilities between the SRO and any Programme Director – but it is essential that the individuals are clear and agreed on who is doing what.

Selection and Appointment of SROs

- 14 Although there were exceptions, in general selection of an SRO for a new project appears to be an ad hoc process and those sponsoring the role did not appear to apply consistent and realistic criteria. If an external SRO needs to be recruited, these criteria would form a key part of the selection documentation. Where the SRO role is allocated to someone already in post in the Department the criteria would ensure the relative strengths and weaknesses of the candidates for the role could be identified – and enable an appropriate support and development environment to be established, possibly including the recruitment of a Programme Director.
- 15 It would be beneficial for SROs to be selected using open, consistent and relevant criteria, and for those making such selections to be aware of the ramifications of their choice. The role is often primarily focused on business-related change management but SRO’s for most projects required some knowledge of Project and Programme Management and often of procurement and IT, sufficient at least to know what specialist skills they need on the project, and to enable them to lead those specialists effectively. The requirement for such knowledge and experience was not always recognised in the selection process for SROs. At Departmental level, the involvement of the PPM Board champion, and where appropriate the Commercial Director and the CIO would ensure SROs had the required skill set – or were supported in their areas of weakness.

Recommendation: PPM Board champions and, where appropriate, Commercial Directors and CIOs should be involved (eg in endorsing the selection criteria and/or identifying the support needs for the successful candidates) in the selection of SROs for major projects (typically those on the MPP list or categorised as High Risk in OGC Gateway™ terms). On request OGC can also play a part.

- 16 We found SROs divided into two classes:
- a those who had responsibility for developing the policy and were given the SRO role to drive delivery. This group generally had less experience of managing large projects.
 - b those who had been appointed to carry out the delivery role (for the largest projects often as a Chief Executive) and had extensive experience of delivery but little policy responsibility or experience. One of the difficulties these SROs faced was their inability to affect the original policy development they were required to deliver.

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- 17 One of the major concerns expressed by the NAO, PAC and OGC is the rate of turnover of SROs. In the last year, nearly half of the MPP projects have changed their SROs, in several cases more than once. The average duration in post is around 18 months, whereas most projects last between 3 and 10 years. We are aware of one high risk project that had 6 SROs in the space of two years. There is a clear correlation between continuity of SRO and high delivery confidence of projects.
- 18 High turnover represents a serious threat to the success of projects. Quite apart from the lack of leadership continuity, each change of SRO will tend to result in a rethink and a change in focus and priorities.
- 19 SROs specifically recruited for the project delivery phase expected to be in post longer, but the tenure amongst those with a policy background was noticeably shorter. The PAC recommended that SROs should be appointed for the duration of the project. This was seen by many to be unrealistic given existing civil service career practices where people expect to move on at least every three years, and where the timing of their moves is generally in their own hands as a result of their decision to apply for other positions.

Recommendation: Departments should aim to appoint SROs, at least those to run projects on the MPP list, for a defined minimum period during which the candidate has agreed not to consider moving. The timing of subsequent changes in SRO should be linked to the achievement of an appropriate project milestones and particular care should be taken to ensure continuity of SRO during periods of departmental re-structuring.

SRO Training, development and support.

- 20 There are several training, accreditation and mentoring initiatives associated with the SRO role, including those offered by the Home Office/APMG, NSfG and some Departments (including DWP and MOD). Most SROs were not aware that any such training was available. None of those interviewed had taken advantage of them and there was a general reluctance to do so, perhaps because they are a relatively senior and experienced group. A structured approach would be more relevant for inexperienced SROs on smaller projects.
- 21 For similar reasons, accreditation of SROs was not generally seen as desirable although the MOD do accredit some of their SROs and provide those new to the role with mandatory training.

Recommendation: OGC should identify and market the range of training and support opportunities available to SROs

Recommendation: Departments should encourage inexperienced SROs to undertake a standard course such as that developed by the Home Office and the APM Group.

- 22 It was suggested to us that some experience of undertaking project assurance activities such as Gateway Reviews would benefit SROs. Although some SROs felt unable to commit the necessary time to becoming a Review Team Leader, OGC has established a fast track process to enable SROs to be given some exposure to the Review Team Member role.

Recommendation: OGC should make provision for SROs of large projects to take part in appropriate Gateway Reviews.

23 Several interviewees thought that personal mentoring would be of value to them, especially when they are facing a new type or scale of project. Mentoring, from an experienced external was seen as helpful but had not been widely sought in the past. Attitudes to mentoring appear to be changing and it may now be seen as more relevant and acceptable

Recommendation: Departments and their SROs should consider using mentors external to the project to provide advice and support.

24 Most interviewed thought that well-structured networking events at which they could compare experiences with SROs of similar projects from other Departments would be of particular value. In some Departments clusters of SROs did get together.

25 There was support for those filling SRO roles being seen as a community, and potentially to be managed and supported as such. There was some push-back to the idea that OGC lead this community. Although the SRO role is seen as a key element in OGC's PPM and procurement strategies, the SRO community was essentially focused on delivering policy, albeit through the vehicle of a project. It is important that someone with a credible track record of delivering major projects should be appointed as community leader.

Recommendation: OGC should facilitate networking events for the community of SROs of large projects championed by a suitable community leader.

Involvement with the supply chain

26 A concern, expressed by the IT industry in particular, is that SROs are not sufficiently visible to them, knowledgeable about commercial issues, or involved in commercial negotiations. We found that most of the SROs did make themselves available to bidders and suppliers, although they did not get involved in formal negotiations, leaving these to commercial experts. The parameters for such negotiations were, however, discussed and approved at Project Boards.

27 The innovation of a Senior Responsible Industry Executive as the supplier's equivalent to the SRO is generally welcomed, but is not yet universally adopted. Our impression is that there is more progress to be made in building supplier relationships at the SRO level.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Departments should incorporate performance in the SRO role in individual performance targets. This will both legitimise the activity and provide an opportunity for good performance to be recognised.
- 2 PPM Board champions and, where appropriate, Commercial Directors and CIOs should be involved (eg in endorsing the selection criteria and/or identifying the support needs for the successful candidates) in the selection of SROs for major projects (typically those on the MMP list or categorised as High Risk in OGC GatewayTM terms). On request OGC can also play a part.
- 3 Departments should aim to appoint SROs, at least those to run projects on the MMP list, for a defined minimum period during which the candidate has agreed not to consider moving. The timing of subsequent changes in SRO should be linked to the achievement of an appropriate project milestones and particular care should be taken to ensure continuity of SRO during periods of departmental re-structuring.
- 4 OGC should identify and market the range of training and support opportunities available to SROs
- 5 Departments should encourage inexperienced SROs to undertake a standard course such as that developed by the Home Office and the APM Group.
- 6 OGC should make provision for SROs of large projects to take part in appropriate Gateway Reviews.
- 7 Departments and their SROs should consider using mentors external to the project to provide advice and support.
- 8 OGC should facilitate networking events for the community of SROs of large projects championed by a suitable community leader.

ANNEX A - Interviewees

Phase 1

David Rossington	SRO – Fire Resilience
James Hall	SRO – National Identity Scheme
Caroline Rookes	SRO – Enabling Retirement Savings
Martin Deutz	SRO - Carbon Capture and Storage
Bernadette Kenny	SRO – PAYE
Richard Ramsey	SRO – Nuclear Decommissioning
Tim Jones	Chief Executive and SRO – PADA
Jeremy Beeton	SRO – Olympics
David Ackland	Home Office PPMSU
Susan Schofield	Ex-SRO Fire Resilience and MOD Director HR
David Stephens	Defence Acquisition Change Programme

Phase 2

Vivienne Drew	SRO – Consumer Direct
Mark Harris	SRO - Lottery Third Licence Competition
Catherine Brown	Chief Ex and SRO – BRP Core Operational Systems
Ian Diamond	Chief Executive and SRO – Research Councils SSC
Naomi Ferguson	SRO - New Penalties
David Armond	Ex-SRO - KERNO
Richard Munden	SRO – DH Estate Rationalisation
Winston Sutherland	NSfG author of paper on PSA SROs
Ray Shostack	Head of PMDU
John Parr	Defence Academy