

Customer Satisfaction study

A report for Government Skills
April 2009



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Executive summary

There was a general consensus that Government Skills has developed well into a much more effective organisation than some felt it would become at its start in 2006. It has established its role and position within the Sector, raised the quality of its staff and begun to work effectively with employers. Early successes have been the work on Apprentices and on the Skills Pledge. The Peer Review process has been welcomed by most, even if it was uncomfortable for some. There is still some way to go to deliver on other elements of the Skills Strategy for Government particularly in the joint procurement and commissioning of training and in the articulation of skill needs at more senior levels and in less well developed professional skills areas. The work currently under way has yet to be fully realised.

Government Skills was credited with helping to focus employer organisations on skills issues. Though some were concerned that it could become too much driven by Government policy initiatives rather than being employer driven, there was a recognition that Government Skills has become more responsive and, generally, was trying to support employers rather than impose burdens on them. The Account Manager system was perceived to be starting to work effectively and there was praise for the way in which the Chief Executive maintains contact with key employers and encourages a responsive approach by his staff. Success has been achieved, and was perceived to be more likely, when Heads of Profession were seen to drive the agenda with the close support of Government Skills. There was optimism that the developing relationship with key Heads of Profession would bear fruit in the relatively near future.

Satisfaction with Government Skills was clear from a range of respondents but, inevitably, this was not spread evenly across the Sector. Those involved in Government Skills projects or work streams clearly presented a more positive picture. Some felt that the right balance had yet to be struck between Government Skills and some established professional organisations, e.g. those for lawyers. Not all Departments, especially not the smaller policy oriented ones, saw their own needs being articulated or met yet and there was some suggestion that the segmentation of the Sector could be reviewed with like minded organisations brought together possibly with the same Account Managers. In particular there was a feeling that more could be done for Non Departmental Public Bodies: more champions in this area should be sought.

As Government Skills is now seen to be operating effectively and to an accepted strategy, this has raised some concerns about its relationship with other elements in the Centre such as the National School for Government and the Cabinet Office Capabilities Group. Some saw Government Skills and the National School as competitors whereas Government Skills should be helping employers define the need and commission from the School a high quality product to meet it. There should also be more alignment between Government Skills' programme and the work of the Capabilities Group.

There was general consensus that Government Skills had now established a sound base and would be able to drive the strategy forward. It had worked hard to develop effective partnership working and to respond to all parts of the Sector: the Devolved Administrations, the Armed Forces and Non-Departmental Public Bodies as well as mainstream Government Departments expressed satisfaction and optimism for the future.

Introduction

Experian and John Barker were commissioned by Government Skills in February 2009 to conduct a short independent study of customer satisfaction amongst its customers. These were, for this purpose, defined as the Permanent Secretary Heads of core Civil Service Departments and the Devolved Administrations and the Heads of Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs). The purpose of the study was to provide information on Government Skills' reputation amongst its customers to help test two key requirements for re-licensing as a Sector Skills Council:

- customer focus
- customer satisfaction

The study comprised a series of semi structured interviews with a sample of heads of organisations and a very small number of key HR Directors. Where possible these were carried out face-to-face, but three were conducted by telephone. In one case a written submission was received.

This report is in four parts. It first records views of respondents on the role and responsibilities of Government Skills and how effectively it carries out and communicates them. Secondly it reports on the level of satisfaction with key areas of work. Then it covers comments on Government Skills' working relationships both with customers and other parts of the Sector. Finally it passes on some thoughts from respondents about areas for future development. In doing so it attempts to summarise the sometimes disparate views of different departments. It also intersperses the text with quotations (not always absolutely verbatim) from respondents' responses to questions. The authors are grateful to all those interviewed for their time and frank views.

1 Engagement with Government Skills

1.1 Overall role of Government Skills

It was clear from a number of respondents that, at its outset in 2006, Government Skills' role and purpose were not well understood. There was uncertainty about whether there was a need for a separate Sector Skills Council for Government or whether the Sector was sufficiently coherent to allow a Council to be effective in bringing it together. It was equally clear, however, that over the last 12 to 18 months Government Skills has succeeded in establishing a clearer understanding of and commitment to its role.

"I thought it was a bit of an odd thing when it was created: I was not sure we needed it. But I now think it is a good idea: there is uniqueness to the Civil Service not served by other Sector Skills Councils."

"This is an odd sector.....Government Skills have a huge range of activity to cover, from Meat and Livestock Inspectors to the British National Space Centre. It is a very big ask to get the Sector to work coherently together."

"The leadership can take a lot of credit. They have come a long way in the last 12 to 18 months. When they started up the big question was whether they were really going to offer any value added or if they were just a bunch of enthusiasts."

"Government Skills has definitely improved in what it is doing, how it is doing it and its priorities compared to 18 months ago."

"Government Skills has started from a low base and is doing OK. The Sector would be in a worse situation without it and in general it has had a positive effect."

Most respondents are clear that Government Skills has a cross-sector strategic role to address skills gaps and, by and large, are aware of the broad programme of Government Skills. The Skills Strategy, the Peer Review process and the Skills Pledge have served to heighten awareness of skills issues. However there are still areas where there is a relative lack of clarity about the role of Government Skills. These are mainly in smaller, policy oriented departments, where the respondent was not involved in current work with Government Skills, and in NDPBs.

1.2 Areas of skills development

There is a clear acceptance that Government Skills has an important role at lower levels. It has been successful with apprenticeships and helped at level 2 with the Skills Pledge. Respondents acknowledge that there is a political imperative for Government Skills in these areas, but some expressed concern that over-concentration at that level will distract Government Skills' priorities and prevent them from tackling issues at higher levels and from building on work already started in those areas.

“My general opinion of Government Skills and the LSC is that they have always been better at the level 2 stuff. Where they really need to get better is pushing that higher level stuff, accrediting higher level courses and training.”

“This risks being distorted by the political drive. Apprenticeships could become a distraction and distort what Government Skills are about. There’s an inherent risk that this over-rides the need for general up-skilling.”

Not all respondents, however, necessarily agreed with this. There was recognition that it would be a mistake to try to do too much at once. Government Skills should concentrate on doing a few things well.

“I don’t believe we have been focussing on apprenticeships too much. The example from e-Skills is that it is important to do 3 or 4 things well over 5 to 6 years. For Government Skills apprenticeships were the first success. This should be the first of a few.”

“They need to identify two or three key priorities that can be achieved quickly.....to lay foundations for longer-term success.”

A number of respondents commented favourably that Government Skills has recognised that each organisation has different priorities and frameworks and that they must work with them to address these needs rather than just look for universal solutions. This more responsive approach to partnership working has been welcomed by departments who have appreciated Government Skills’ help in trying to align their particular skill strategies with the overall civil service strategy.

“We do have to translate what Government Skills are doing for our own staff and integrate it into our own departmental skills frameworks. It is cross-fertilising well with our skills development for civilians and armed forces. It is linking in to our current provision.”

“An important point is that there is close synergy between the skills strategy and NICS plans. In some areas Northern Ireland is ahead of the game such as commonality and consistency of training procurement: Northern Ireland has a shared service centre for all generic training (Centre for Applied Learning) which is also a key aim of the Government Skills strategy.”

“This will be more difficult as departments may have unique needs, so it is important that Government Skills doesn’t aim for a single uniform solution but asks what skills are expected at different levels of the service, what is needed and what can be done. Government Skills is taking the smart approach in not imposing a solution.”

“HMRC had already advanced considerably down the route of our Tax Profession and this work is now fully aligned to that of the Government Skills agenda and Strategy.”

“Well for ourselves we have been doing something different to the Skills Strategy. Over the last two years we have brought together our ideas focussing on developing a common set of generic skills, like management.....our priorities aren’t

the same as other departments. We have more people with PhDs than others, they are specialists. We are pleased that they are addressing some common needs like for MBAs – we are pleased about that.”

1.3 Communications

The majority of respondents were satisfied with communications with Government Skills and particularly praised the leadership. However at Permanent Secretary/ Head of Organisation level not all individuals had corporate responsibilities that brought them directly into contact with Government Skills and made them aware of their day-to-day activities. Nevertheless most felt that the level of contact they had was about right and they were aware of positive comments from staff about lower level contacts.

“The relationship is professionally managed and well handled. All dealings with Government Skills are positive. I feel well engaged and have no concerns about the levels of communication.”

“Relations with Government Skills are positive, with good levels of communication at Chief Executive level and Account Manager levels.”

“I have very good one-to-ones with the Chief Executive who keeps me in touch with general thinking and gives me feedback on my people’s contacts with Government Skills – there is lots of working level contact.”

“We find them very diligent, they always come to brief us before meetings. And we don’t have any inconclusive meetings, which is what we prefer, given our usual way of working.”

Generally speaking, the structure of communications is considered about right. Permanent Secretaries had all had individual meetings with the Chief Executive whose appearance, twice a year, at Permanent Secretary Meetings is felt to be at the right level. The Account Manager approach has also been welcomed with quarterly meetings with HR Directors and more regular contact on specific issues.

“Government Skills has the right strategy but was slow to staff up, although now that an account management system is in place things are moving in the right direction.”

“Government Skills has a secondee from Northern Ireland as our Account Manager, which has meant there has been a close and good relationship – they have gone out of their way to engage with the NICS in the development of the Skills Strategy and to conduct research in Northern Ireland.”

The system is still developing and there were some comments about not all communications being channelled through the Account Manager.

“At a working level they could do with better information flows from the management boards and the strategic level to get that information to staff on the ground.”

“The initial account management relationship has been rocky in that HMRC appeared to receive communications from a number of Government Skills sources in an apparently scattergun and haphazard approach..... Things have improved considerably in the last 6 months on this front.”

“Approaches and requests land in the department in an uncoordinated way. I would prefer a regular meeting with Government Skills where we cover everything with one person.”

In some cases it was felt that Government Skills staff had been too direct and challenging though others took the view that constructive challenge was a necessary function for Government Skills. Inevitably some relationships were less positive than others but these seemed to be very much in the minority. One area where it has taken time to establish a more effective relationship has been with the Ministry of Justice largely because it has taken time to work out the respective roles of Skills for Justice and Government Skills. There was also some concern expressed about the extent to which communications with NDPBs are effective enough.

“I think the staff would say that they want more support and less challenge, but then maybe that challenge is necessary to sort out the weaker plans.”

“They are well established now and I’d like to see them getting a bit more assertive – they could be more assertive in offering support to Departments in areas of weakness.”

“They do need more champions around the departments and NDPBs though, 4 or 5 people who can spread the word on their behalf. They need a more assertive communications strategy: they need to get out of the Whitehall bubble.”

2 Satisfaction with key areas of work

Respondents were asked a range of open-ended questions to explore how satisfied they were with some key areas of Government Skills' work and their responses are summarised in the following section.

2.1 Effectiveness in driving up skills demand

Respondents generally felt that Government Skills, especially through the Skills Strategy development and Peer Reviews, have succeeded in raising awareness in departments of skills issues and in keeping eyes on the ball. There is some doubt whether it has succeeded in driving up the demand for skills directly in staff or, indeed, whether it should attempt to do so. Respondents thought that the correct approach was for Government Skills to work with and through them to reach staff. It should be organisation leaders who should be driving skill development with support from the Sector Skills Council, not the other way round.

“Government Skills is not that visible at a staff level, but is working behind the scenes with departmental leadership to raise skills – which is as it should be.”

“We have the final decision on the direction we take but Government Skills works well in a supporting and advisory role. They are a help rather than a hindrance and work in partnership with us rather than using a “stick approach.”

“They need to be at the shoulder of the Permanent Secretaries with the key skills roles. They need to be seen as critical by those leaders. They need someone else to sell them up front, i.e. those leaders, with a communication plan geared to the 3 or 4 successes they are aiming for.”

One area where Government Skills is seen by most to have successfully driven up demand is for apprenticeships. It was suggested that they should build on that success using similar approaches in other areas.

“Government Skills is being strongly associated with apprenticeships.”

“Where they can drive up demand is for very specific front line skills.”

“We have encouraged our people who are without formal qualifications to apply for NVQs and Apprenticeships. Our Union Learning Representatives have also been actively supporting us in this area to mutual advantage.”

2.2 Professional Skills for Government

This question received a range of sometimes contradictory responses. Overall there was good awareness of the PSG competency framework. A measure of Government Skills' success in taking this forward has been the way in which a number of Departments are embedding it into their HR processes.

"I've been surprised at the level of staff knowledge of PSG within the Department. Our Skills Strategy Board is mapping competences against PSG – so it is being used widely. Department recruitment is also using the PSG framework to structure requirements for applicants. There was a concern that it was overly complex, however it is now well embedded and encourages people to think about what is needed in advance."

"PSG has led us to change our recruitment gateway."

"At Grades 6 and 7, our current competences are totally aligned to the PSG core competences. The Core Competences are currently used in our Grade 7 Gateway process and our Fast Stream/Graduate Recruitment processes."

"PSG has been adopted and we are aligning grades and competences with it."

However PSG is not seen as relevant by the whole Sector. This is perhaps not surprising given that it was devised explicitly for the Civil Service.

"Its not relevant for the Armed Forces, it's for the core civil service."

"PSG isn't having an impact at ACAS – it's a good idea but we would have done it differently, for example looking for accreditation with long standing organisations like IOD or CMI rather than have a new, separate programme."

"PSG is relevant because it is making us think, but it's not exactly what we are doing. It is useful to have someone like Government Skills who can take that away and work with it."

There was some recognition that Government Skills had inherited PSG (which was created and launched a couple of years before Government Skills was established) at a time when it was not in the best of shape but have worked well to maintain it and to make it increasingly relevant. The key issues for the future are how Government Skills can work with the key Policy and Operational Delivery professions to articulate the skill set and drive demand forward.

"The other issue is their ownership of PSG. In the best civil service tradition it was the best idea worst launched. It's been over complicated and, although its developing, its still pretty patchy in places. There is a big test ahead for Government Skills around how they continue the embedding process. They have 'beg, steal and borrow'ed to get where they are with some professions, which have come a long way."

"Government Skills has maintained an unusual degree of stability around PSG and have done well to maintain its relevance. It is flexible enough for us though it can sometimes be seen too much through the prism of the big battalions"

“PSG is relevant as a framework, but seems to have been pushed down the Agenda.”

“We are particularly benefiting from a fruitful and effective working relationship with the Government Skills team which is developing the Operational delivery profession. This is the model we are working to replicate across all projects.”

“PSG only relates to lower SCS levels and in the professional domain Government Skills struggles to define core skills at the most senior levels. It should be creating a better definition of what makes a good senior civil servant – the most senior levels require intensely specialist skills in administration in the public sector.”

“I think the employer voice will develop this. Will Heads of professions form a network and pull together with Government Skills to develop a policy programme? Departments need co-ownership of the programme as they are in the primary position to make it happen.”

“PSG has become something of a tarnished acronym. They don’t need to leap around doing something new. People are starting to recognise what it is. Government Skills have to make it work. It won’t really take off until someone gets hold of policy making recognising that PSG was about an absence of skills. We don’t want it to just become a tick box handout at interviews.”

2.3 Skills Strategies

The Skills Strategy has been generally well received as complementary to Departments’ own strategies and training initiatives.

“The Northern Ireland learning and development strategy will be refreshed in 2009, which will be done with one eye on the Government Skills strategy to ensure there is alignment where possible and appropriate”

“The department’s skills strategy is completely aligned with the Government Skills’ strategy. With staff moving across departments not just within DCSF it is important that the wider context of employee development is considered. DCSF is getting its act together on the people strategy clarifying the offer throughout the working lifecycle – Government Skills’ models have been very helpful in this regard.”

In some places Government Skills has had to challenge and drive departments to deliver on their own strategies but even here there was a pragmatic acceptance that this brought benefits and has laid the foundation for the future. The key for the future is to work with those departments to embed the strategies in ways that better meets their specific needs.

“It was very bad timing for us: it was when we were doing our change programme. But we are in position now and might do better with that in the future; we will be ready soon.”

“It has reinforced the need to escalate the whole Government Skills agenda within the Department.”

“Government Skills contributed to the development of our skills strategy by holding us to account and pushing and prompting us in areas that we may not have delivered otherwise.”

“What we really want is for Government Skills to link in with us. How are they going to get involved in our skills agenda?”

“The skills strategy is good but how Government Skills makes it happen is now crucial. It could have a role in information exchange – there would be value in the proactive transfer of training techniques.”

2.4 Focus of strategic skills issues.

There was general support for the Skills issues that Government Skills is focussing on.

“I think they are focussing on the right issues, they are talking the right language and they have the right intentions.”

“The increased emphasis on benchmarking is absolutely right.”

“Yes, it’s on the right lines, focussing on a few high level priorities.”

“Yes the overall strategy is focussing on the right issues.”

“The focus of Government Skills is sensible and in the right direction.”

2.5 Responsiveness on skills issues

There was a more uneven picture in response to the question of how responsive Government Skills was to skills issues in departments. This was partly related to the extent of engagement of the individual respondent with Government Skills and partly to the extent to which the outcomes to date have been relevant to their needs. In particular the smaller policy oriented departments were less clear about the relevance of Government Skills work.

“We don’t have that much to do with them, but why should they be responsive to me? They should be focussing on the big volume training deficits – the big delivery areas.”

“The agenda for us is different than for operational delivery departments, but I don’t feel this is always built into the Government Skills process. Some areas are cumbersome and burdensome for small departments like ours and no adjustment is made for different departmental requirements. It needs to think about how it implements different activities in different departments.”

“Government Skills have issued very tight deadlines at times that have totally ignored the Operational timetables and this is not helpful. January to March is highly pressured for us so a Skills Survey at this time was not helpful – we are very happy now with the revised timetable.”

In other areas, however, there was a much more positive picture. And there was a suggestion that Government Skills might segment its market more and work differently with different groups of like-minded departments.

“Government Skills is trying hard and compromises well between the wider civil service requirements and issues and those of a small department.”

“We work well with them. There is an understanding of what we can bring and what we need to take away. But then we haven’t gone to them with specific needs that we need addressing.”

“Are they responsive enough? I think they have come a long way. The Peer Review process has formed a good network of Account Managers. What they could do better is linking departments with similar issues. They are moving in the right direction for this e.g. through the common action group.”

2.6 Effectiveness of leadership

Respondents made many positive comments about the leadership of Government Skills and the success it has achieved in turning around the organisation over the last 12 to 18 months. In particular there was a widespread perception, even by those customers where relationships have been less smooth, that the approach to customers is moving more towards one of partnership. The leadership’s visibility with Permanent Secretaries was generally seen to be about right. Though one respondent felt that maybe the Chief Executive should be more visible with other communities, such as HR Leaders, generally it was felt that the senior drive should come from employers rather than Government Skills.

“The leadership is positive and has improved with this Chief Executive.”

“There has been the occasional clash over the style of some of the contact which seemed to show Government Skills acting like the old Cabinet Office model of a central diktat rather than an equal partnership in a relationship working to a common goal. Challenges have been made on both sides and resolved.”

“They have done a terrific job taking it from where it was to where it is now. It’s better managed, they’ve got some impressive people on board and it isn’t the sleepy hollow it appeared to be a few years ago.”

“Andrew places great store in relations with Permanent Secretaries and also at account manager level, which is working well. The performance reporting of Government Skills is sharper, more professional and disciplined.”

“Communication at the Permanent Secretary level is at the regular meetings, although there is often a crowded agenda. Andrew has attended two in the last year and this is about right. It is not always necessary or appropriate for him to attend more frequently. Visibility is about right – any more would be too much and unrealistic.”

“Higher visibility is not always the most useful approach.”

“Originally he was a breath of fresh air. He takes the trouble to engage with me and is interested in the opinion of our HR. He demonstrates an interest in building the right relationships in a complex industry. However, at some times he is a bit invisible. It is the role of the Chief Executive to ensure that Government Skills communicates in a language its customers understand, which they do not always do.”

“To me it seems like the right approach, but three months ago people might have said something different. They seem to be changing tack and seeking to work more in partnership than being adversarial. Maybe there is recognition that where they have been is not where they want to be.”

“They need to be at the shoulder of Permanent Secretaries with key skills roles.”

3 Working relationships

3.1 Relationships with customer organisations

Overall the relationship with customers was felt to be good and where it had not been so well regarded was seen to be improving. The Account Manager system was well received. Relations with HR functions were generally but not entirely good. Support to the Learning and Development community seemed to be well received. Indeed some respondents expressed a little surprise that their staff had been as positive as they had been in the briefs that they had provided for the interview.

“There’s a good working relationship, although the unique situation of Northern Ireland with our account manager as a secondee has certainly helped this.”

“Now that the account manager system is in place things are moving in the right direction.”

“A good example from my Head of Learning and Development is that Government Skills has set up a ‘huddle’ – an on-line portal to share best practice.”

“We use the Huddle as a prime source of communication and information and regularly access it for keeping up to date.”

“The relationship is maturing here. It’s important that the account manager function continues to develop.”

The area where there was more uncertainty was the relationships with the Heads of Professions. The relationship clearly differed between organisations and between professions. Where professions were well established in the economy as a whole with their own existing accreditation and Continuing Professional Development systems, the role of Government Skills was not always seen as adding value. Some respondents, however, did accept that, even for those established professions, the Central Government context provided a common set of skill requirements not replicated elsewhere.

“We are a bit uncertain about the links between Government Skills and the professions.”

“They have a good relationship overall with the Department, though it’s more of a varied picture with the Heads of Profession. A key issue for Government Skills is how they work with these specialist functions – they need to get a complete picture of the landscape and across the professions and then establish how to work with each to best effect.”

“Human Resources are fine. In terms of Heads of Profession, it doesn’t necessarily translate into our structure. They will deal with the Army directly occasionally, but the central policy is held here.”

“Our HR people have very good working relationships – it’s particularly important for us to have networks because of the risk of isolation.”

“There has been more support recently from Government Skills for our Heads of Profession though it is too early to judge its effectiveness.”

“Government Skills has brought our Heads of Profession into one room for the first time and encouraged joined up working. Our Finance Head is keen to build on that.”

“Lawyers are very sophisticated and have very clear requirements in terms of learning and development and Government Skills may not have handled them as sensitively as they might have done. They have been trying to shoe-horn what is an existing and successful skills development process into what Government Skills wants. The other end of the scale could be OGC procurement personnel, which is a less developed profession who are keen to work with Government Skills and have helped to develop their profession.”

“In terms of Heads of Profession, they are really very separate. Many are lawyers – little goes on here.”

3.2 Relationships with other agencies

There was a degree of confusion and a lack of clarity about how Government Skills relates to other players at the centre. It is clearly a developing picture with changes contemplated at the National School of Government and possibly a move to different governance structures. Most responses were looking for a more joined up approach and greater alignment between Government Skills, the National School and the Cabinet Office Capabilities Group. Each of these was seen as having distinct responsibilities although currently there seemed to be some overlaps.

“The relationship between the National School of Government and Government Skills is critical, but seems to be more constructive rivalry at the moment.”

“It doesn’t feel very joined up with the National School of Government and Cabinet Office.”

“In my experience getting the governance, engagement and alignment between the agencies is difficult. The National School has had a new lease of life. It has a capable leader who understands the engagement required from permanent secretaries. The jury is out as to if it can transform quickly enough. There is confusion as the National School is part supplier and part designer/commissioner.”

“It’s a bit of a dog’s breakfast, to be honest. The important thing, now that Government Skills is functioning well, is that we hold on to it – it is an anchor for a lot of what we do.”

“Permanent Secretaries need to decide the role of the National School of Government – at the moment it is one provider among many. The National School shouldn’t be driving the training agenda – Government Skills has a role in deciding what it should provide.”

“I believe in what the National School do – it is right to develop our leaders with a common view of what it means to be a great leader. Part of Government Skills role is in the mass market – why is training for Contact Centre staff being procured from all over the place? And then there’s the Cabinet Office Capability Group laying down the ground rules for the future workforce. Where do these all fit together? So far they are not all relevant to each other.”

“The other big test will be how Government Skills relationship with the National School develops. The recent Capability Review concluded that you get the National School you deserve as customers. We are not intelligent enough as customers. That involves so-owning and co-designing. Government Skills should have a role here. Government Skills and the Cabinet Office Capability Group have an OK relationship. How these relationships develop is going to be a big question.”

“Different bits of HR deal with each of the three. But this is not orchestrated – it needs a simpler model.”

4 Priority areas for further development

When respondents were asked what were the things about Government Skills that they wanted to change, there were two themes to emerge. Generally, however, the view was that what was wanted was for Government Skills to consolidate its position and to continue to develop in the same direction and to deliver on those aspects of the Skills Strategy yet to be brought to fruition.

The first theme was getting funding and governance arrangements agreed so that Government Skills can move forward and cement some of its achievements.

“There are too many involved at the strategic and operational level at the moment. There also needs to be more certainty in the funding – ideally straight from the Treasury not from individual departments.”

“They need to end up reporting to a Board of employers that drive it rather than them being driven by Government Skills. They might need both an NDPB Board and a Civil Service one.”

“Government Skills is doing a good job – they’ve been asked to do a lot but departments must also take responsibility and support the agenda and strategy. The skill needs are there so the partnership approach should continue, but the onus is also on departments to act.”

“More work could be done in utilising the tremendous amount of information they must have across a large number of Government Departments and sharing their analysis to support the ongoing work of the Departments.”

“They need to drive through and deliver on the course they are on by developing the methods for leaders of departments to monitor and deliver on their tasks. The challenge will be to keep on track in quite choppy waters.”

The other theme was that Government Skills approach might become more segmented so that it becomes more complementary to the issues of groups of departments rather than looking for universal solutions.

“The account manager process should be segmented so the same individual deals with like-minded departments. This segmentation should also be matched by the National School’s to help the two to work better together.”

“They should be more complementary to our professional staff.”

“We can work with Skills for Justice very specifically, maybe because we have that big purchaser role. They are very customer focussed and flexible. If we say we need something they will go away and devise it. But we could be a big purchaser for Government Skills and the relationship is getting better.”

5 Conclusion

It was clear that Government Skills is perceived to have come a long way in the last 12 to 18 months. Faced with an uncertain start when it was first established and a disparate sector which had not entirely bought into the need for a sector wide skills body, Government Skills has established its role and developed ways of working with its customers that are generally seen as helpful. The development of the Civil Service Skills Strategy and the Peer Review process has cemented its position. It has achieved some significant early successes, notably the work on apprenticeships and the Skills Pledge. Customers recognise that there is still some way to go for Government Skills to realise its full potential. They anticipate that work currently underway on joint procurement and commissioning and on articulating fully the skill needs of the two large professional groupings – policy and operational delivery – will go a long way to help in that.