



## Questions & Answers

### For Review Team Members on the Assurance Reviews Process

#### Audience

This Q&A is a quick reference tool which provides an overview of the Assurance Reviews process and practical guidance for review team members.

#### At a glance

The Q&A supports and should be read in conjunction with the publication, *Resource Management Guide 106: Australian Government Assurance Reviews* (the Guidance) at: <http://www.finance.gov.au/assurancereviews>

- [What is an Assurance Review?](#)
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#### Q&A: Overview and Practical Guidance for Review Team Members

##### Q: What is an Assurance Review?

**A:** Assurance Reviews are designed to strengthen assurance practices and to build capability associated with the delivery and implementation of Government programs and projects. An Assurance Review is not a compliance audit, a detailed technical review or an inquiry. A program or project level Assurance Review supports Senior Responsible Officials (SROs) and others responsible for successful delivery and can provide decision makers and other stakeholders with the confidence that a program or project can deliver on time, within budget and to the required quality standard.

The two types of Assurance Reviews are:

- Implementation Readiness Assessments
- Gateway Reviews

## **Q: What are the key characteristics and principles of Assurance Reviews?**

**A:** Key characteristics of Assurance Reviews include:

- Short in duration, generally no more than 5 days.
- Based on non-attributable interviews.
- Flexibility in timing and scope, tailored to reflect the stage of policy development and delivery.
- Value-add – the specialist pool of senior reviewers have skills and experience relevant to the policy delivery environment.

Assurance Reviews are conducted by applying the following principles:

- Reviewers are independent of the sponsoring entity, stakeholders and government and their focus is on assisting the entity to implement and deliver successful programs and projects.
- Reviewers are sourced from the private and public sectors and each review team member shares the responsibility to make the review process a success and the Assurance Review report a useful and constructive evidence-based document.
- Review teams are required to be efficient and well organised, able to communicate effectively and influentially to establish clarity of purpose and encourage collaborative participation by the sponsoring entity, the SRO, program/project team members and other stakeholders.
- Capability is built within the sponsoring entity and in the Australian Public Service more generally by using highly credentialed reviewers who provide mentoring and coaching.
- Lessons learned, derived from observations made from Assurance Reviews, are promulgated regularly on a non-attributable basis. The resulting publications highlight opportunities for improvement which are intended to assist entities to better identify ways of improving their management of programs, projects and their benefits realisation management practices.

## **Q: What contributes to the conduct of a successful review?**

**A:** Participants in an Assurance Review should engage fully in the process, demonstrating a willingness to share information openly and honestly. This will assist in building a collaborative working relationship among the participants, resulting in the production of an evidence-based, constructive and action-oriented Assurance Review report with clearly worded findings and recommendations. Review recommendations and findings should 'stand alone' and be able to be applied. It should also be easy to recognise when they have been actioned.

An Assurance Review is most effective when the program or project team is conscious that the review is being conducted to provide assistance to a program or project, rather than being seen as an externally imposed assessment or compliance audit. The confidentiality of the process should also help encourage that working relationship. Discussions with all stakeholders and interviewees should be approached as opportunities for two-way dialogue.

In addition, an important benefit of an Assurance Review can be gained as much from the dialogue and mentoring between the review team and the program/project team as it can from the Assurance Review report. Reviewers should seek to put stakeholders at ease, give them the confidence to talk openly about the program or project and contribute their

thoughts, concerns and issues to the discussion. The manner of questioning should be constructive, positive, strictly objective and non-personal. Review teams should adopt a consistent approach, both in the way they conduct meetings during the review and in the representations they make about Assurance Reviews.

**Q: What are the responsibilities of the review team?**

**A:** Review team members are selected for the relevance of their skills and experience. Review team members' responsibilities include:

- Conducting the review in accordance with the Assurance Review methodology described in the Assurance Reviews guidance.
- Working cooperatively with all participants in the review, including the review team, the sponsoring entity and Finance's Assurance Review Unit (ARU).
- Identifying relevant documentation for review and stakeholders for interview.
- Examining relevant documentation and participating in interviews with stakeholders to identify key issues and assess delivery confidence of the program/project.
- Participating in the discussion and assessment of the program/project under review in a professional and objective manner.
- Contributing to the development and writing of a high-quality and constructive review report.
- Contributing to briefing the SRO on the review's conclusions and recommendations prior to finalising the report.
- Providing feedback on the Review Team Leader (RTL) to the ARU.

**Q: What are the responsibilities of the Review Team Leader?**

**A:** The RTL's role is essential to the success of an Assurance Review. The RTL facilitates communication and relationships with the SRO, the program/project team and other participants and ensures all review participants understand their responsibilities and the purpose of the Assurance Review. The RTL also leads, guides and coaches review team members throughout the review and provides feedback to develop their skills.

The RTL's responsibilities include:

- Conducting the review in accordance with the Assurance Review methodology described in the Assurance Reviews guidance.
- Liaising with the SRO prior to the planning meeting to establish the context and logistics of the review and identify their concerns and expectations.
- Contacting each member of the review team prior to the planning meeting to introduce themselves and develop an understanding of the skill sets and strengths across the review team.
- Facilitating communications and relationships with the SRO, the program/project team and other participants, including acting as chair during the planning meeting and interviews.
- Identifying key stakeholders to be interviewed, relevant documentation needed for the review and potential information access constraints.
- Formulating the protocols and logistics for the review, including ensuring all participants understand their responsibilities as well as the constructive purpose and structure of the interviews.
- Examining relevant documentation and conducting interviews with stakeholders to identify key issues and assess delivery confidence of the program/project.

- Facilitating the production of the review report with input from the review team, in accordance with the review report template.
- Presenting the draft report to the SRO and discussing the review's conclusions and recommendations with the SRO prior to finalising the report.
- Finalising and delivering the review report to the SRO and the ARU.
- Evaluating review team member performance and providing feedback to the ARU.

The RTL needs to plan early for interviews, ensuring that the appropriate participants are involved, and that review team members and interviewees are aware of the purpose and structure of the interviews.

During interviews, the RTL may need to focus the review team's attention on issues that are important to the program/project's success to prevent it becoming unnecessarily focused on technical aspects.

The RTL also provides leadership to the review team members, including coaching, support and feedback to develop their skills. At the completion of the review, the RTL must complete an evaluation on each review team member. This is provided to the ARU to assist in assembling future review teams.

**Q: Why are confidentiality and accountability important aspects of the conduct of Assurance Reviews?**

**A:** Fostering confidentiality in the review discussions and all review reports encourages candour of participants and helps ensure access to information. This helps achieve the best outcome for the program/project. As part of that confidentiality, it is critical that all program/project documentation is returned to the sponsoring entity at the conclusion of the review. The review team's notes, draft reports and copies of the draft review report are destroyed on the last day of the review.

The only permanent record of the review should be the final review report that was signed by the review team and provided to the SRO and the ARU. In the case of an Implementation Readiness Assessment (IRA) review, the final review report is also provided to central entities by the ARU, on the last day of the review.

It is important that lines of management responsibility within entities is not undermined. To ensure an appropriate level of awareness of Assurance Review activity, SROs are encouraged to ensure the responsible accountable authority is informed of progress of the program/project review, including the outcomes and recommendations arising from any Assurance Reviews. It is considered better practice for the accountable authority and, where appropriate, the responsible minister, to be informed of significant review conclusions.

The use of an Assurance Review does not change the accountability of entities for their programs/projects in any way. SROs must take responsibility for determining and implementing any actions required to address recommendations that are critical to the success of the program/project.

**Q: What must be considered by the review team in preparing the Assurance Review report?**

**A:** Assurance Review reports are confidential, high level, evidence-based, constructive and action-oriented. They identify issues and recommendations that can contribute to the governance, assurance and overall success of the program or project.

An IRA review report provides an overall assessment status for the program or policy being reviewed, as well as a list of recommendations and obstacles to overcome. The IRA review report is provided to the SRO, the ARU, central entities and to Government.

Gateway review reports provide an overall assessment for the program or project at the gate or stage being assessed, as well as an indication of how critical its recommendations are. A five-tier rating system is used to indicate the overall assessment of delivery confidence for the program or project. It is the responsibility of the sponsoring entity to determine what action should be taken to address these recommendations, and where applicable, to take action in line with the Assurance Reviews Enhanced Notification process.