Who wants to be a Chief Executive?

This session was designed to provide attendees with a greater insight into the role, and working life of today’s Chief Executive from the perspective of both the private and public sector; and to consider whether this is their next step and how they might start to build their ability to apply for such a position.

Chair: Joyce Redfearn, SOLACE Enterprises

Panel: James Blake – Chief Executive, St Albans City and District Council
Anne Torry - Managing Director – Zurich Municipal

Several participants and speakers discussed the way in which they had ended up in their roles. There was a general pattern that many had not followed a defined, clear path but had tried to ensure they had a broad range of experience and skills. The general view was that an initial ‘break’ involved both some good luck and good judgement. Networking (both internal and external) was highlighted as important, alongside beginning to ‘think yourself’ into the role and consider what you might do if you were in the leadership position.

Both speakers spoke about what their role involves on a day-to-day basis, with a lot of similarity between the two sectors. Both spoke about balancing three key ‘facets’ of the role: internal management, working with customers/residents and managing ‘upwards and outwards’. This third facet was present in the roles of both speakers – it involves ‘shaping the context’ in which the organisation operates and managing relationships with those who wish to control what the organisation does – whether that be politicians, regulators, Government or others. One of the key challenges both speakers raised is ensuring this last group does not take up too much time. Both speakers also talked about communication skills in the broadest sense, the ability to tell compelling narratives, engage people, inspire trust and ‘win over’ internal and external stakeholders.

One speaker raised the important of ‘strategic details’ – those relatively small details or projects which have strategic implications. These will vary depending on your organisation, but both speakers agreed that identifying and being on top of them is a critically important skill.

Finally, there were several discussions about the practicalities and relationship issues thrown up by applying to lead an organisation, particularly for internal positions. These focussed on how to prepare, how to manage relationships with colleagues who are also applying and, if successful, how to move past this. Both speakers offered suggestions here, including being completely open and transparent with colleagues – as well as quickly meeting with unsuccessful colleagues to have an open conversation, clear the air and move on.