

Technical Note

Cash shells and special purpose acquisition companies (SPACs)

LR 5; LR 6;
LR 14 and LR
7.2.1R

The terms 'cash shell' and 'SPAC' are not defined in the Listing Rules. However, we note the following points about how these terms are broadly understood, how these types of issuers meet the eligibility requirements for listing shares and when the listing may be suspended if a reverse takeover is announced or leaked (as cash shells and SPACs will be shell companies under LR 5.6.5AR).

The terms 'cash shell' and 'SPAC'

Cash shells

'Cash shell' is a term often used for companies whose assets consist wholly or predominantly of cash (or potentially short dated securities). A listed issuer may be a cash shell because it has been admitted to the Official List as a commercial company but has subsequently disposed of all or a majority of its assets and currently operates only residual business activities, if any. These types of issuers may have been admitted to the Official List with either a premium listing (pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Listing Rules) or a standard listing (pursuant to Chapter 14 of the Listing Rules). Cash shells may or may not have a strategy to seek an acquisition opportunity or to develop a business as a start-up. So there is some overlap between cash shells and SPACs.

SPACs

We understand the term special purpose acquisition company or 'SPAC' to mean a new company incorporated to identify and acquire a suitable business opportunity or opportunities. It may also be referred to as a 'search fund'.

Its initial funds are usually raised through an IPO on a stock market or through a fundraising undertaken before the IPO. After IPO, its cash resources are used to identify acquisition opportunities, finance the due diligence costs and potentially fund or part fund the acquisition of a suitable business to invest in.

The issuer may have raised significant funds to finance these activities. However, this is not always the case and we note that many such issuers are microcap companies listing with a market capitalisation of around £1 million.

Eligibility for listing

When these types of issuers are listed, they are most typically, but not always, listed under Chapter 14 of the Listing Rules which sets out requirements for the standard listing of shares.

An applicant which is a cash shell or SPAC would not meet the eligibility requirements for premium listing. This is because it would not have an independent business and a financial track record that meets the requirements of LR 6 (additional requirements for premium listing, commercial companies). It would also not normally have a policy of investing its assets to spread investment risk in accordance with the requirements of LR 15 (closed-ended investment funds). A cash shell or SPAC can list under LR 14 provided it is not an 'investment entity' as defined in the Listing Rules (LR 14.1.1R and Glossary).

Cash shells that have previously been admitted to premium listing and remain premium listed should note LR 5.4A.16G which will apply to them. This states that there may be situations where an issuer's business has changed over time so that it no longer meets the requirements of the applicable listing category which it was initially assessed for listing. In those situations, we may consider cancelling the listing of the equity shares or suggest to the issuer that, as an alternative, it applies for the transfer of its listing category.

We therefore encourage such issuers to consider whether to apply to us for their listing to be cancelled, or to transfer to standard listing (LR 14), and to contact us to discuss this.

Reverse takeovers

Listed cash shells and SPACs are caught by the provisions on reverse takeovers that apply to a 'shell company' in LR 5.6.5AR. This is because a shell company is a listed issuer whose assets consists solely or predominantly of cash or short dated securities, or whose predominant purpose or objective is to undertake an acquisition or merger or a series of acquisitions or mergers.

Also, the acquisition by a cash shell or SPAC of a target is a reverse takeover according to the definition in LR 5.6.4R and the related guidance in LR 5.6.5G. In particular, the percentage ratios are likely to be 100% or more because, in applying the class tests, the cash and short dated securities held by the cash shell or SPAC must be excluded in calculating its assets and market capitalisation (paragraph 8R(5) in LR 10 Annex 1). Also, the transaction is likely in substance to result in a fundamental change in the business or a change in board or voting control of the issuer.

The classification of the transaction as a reverse takeover under the Listing Rules is important because a cash shell or SPAC will be subject to the rebuttable presumption that, where a reverse takeover is announced or leaked, there will be insufficient publicly available information in the market that will often lead to the suspension of listing in the context of a reverse takeover. We refer to this as the 'rebuttable presumption

of suspension'. In this case the issuer or, if the issuer is premium listed, its sponsor, is required to contact us as early as possible to discuss whether a suspension is appropriate (before announcing a reverse takeover which has been agreed or is in contemplation) or to request a suspension (where details of the reverse takeover have leaked).

Also, we will generally seek to cancel the listing of an issuer's equity shares when the issuer completes a reverse takeover (LR 5.2.3G).

We discuss these points below.

Suspending listing

We may suspend, with effect from such time as we may determine, the listing of any securities if the smooth operation of the market is, or may be, temporarily jeopardised or it is necessary to protect investors (LR 5.1.1R(1)).

Rebuttable presumption of suspension

The Listing Rules create a rebuttable presumption that certain types of issuer will be suspended upon announcement or leak of a reverse takeover as there will be insufficient publicly available information in the market.

When suspending, we will rely on the general suspension power set out under LR 5.1.1R(1) which is supported by examples of when we may suspend listing in LR 5.1.2G. These include where it appears to us that the issuer cannot accurately assess its financial position and inform the market accordingly in LR 5.1.2G(3) or there is insufficient information in the market about a proposed transaction in LR 5.1.2G(4).

Although LR 5.1.2G(4) refers only to a 'proposed transaction', we would consider this to refer to situations where information has been announced or leaked in relation to transactions under contemplation, as well as those where the terms have been agreed.

Early engagement on reverse takeovers

LR 5.6.8G highlights that, in the case of a reverse takeover for the types of issuer referred to in LR 5.6.5AR, we will often consider that a suspension will be appropriate, unless we are satisfied that there is sufficient publicly available information about the proposed transaction.

We would like to remind issuers of the need to ensure that they consider Listing Principle 2, which requires issuers to deal with us in an open and co-operative manner, when considering the appropriate time to contact us.

Early engagement with us is particularly important in circumstances where the issuer intends to pursue the transaction or has reached a stage where the transaction can be described as being in contemplation (LR 5.6.7G). A decision to suspend can have a significant market impact and so early engagement, preferably before the point where a reverse transaction can be considered in contemplation, is essential.

Timing of the announcement

LR 5.6.7G sets out examples of when we will generally consider a potential reverse transaction sufficiently advanced to trigger an announcement and that a suspension may be appropriate. However, we know that at times the situation may not be as clear cut as set out in these examples. There may be situations where there has been a purely speculative leak and a potential suspension would be inappropriate.

We also recognise that competitive auction processes are often difficult to fit into this framework, so we are happy to discuss the specifics of each case with issuers or their advisers. In making a decision about whether it is appropriate to consider suspension, we would expect the issuer to apply a similar rationale as they would when considering the announcement requirements under the Market Abuse Regulation (MAR). We would not, for example, expect the issuer to request a suspension where the transaction is too speculative to trigger an announcement under MAR.

Timing of suspension, cancellation and readmission

When a reverse takeover is announced, we may suspend listing if we believe, having considered the information in the market on the target at the time, that there is or may be a disorderly market or it is necessary to protect investors. We will follow this approach in the case of acquisitions by shell companies because our experience is that share prices in these types of issuers can experience a lot of volatility and price spikes around the time of a proposed transaction.

As noted above, LR 5.2.3G makes it clear that we will generally cancel the listing of a company's equity shares when it completes a reverse takeover. UK-regulated markets follow suit and will cancel the admission to trading. So if the issuer wants to remain listed and admitted to trading, it will need to apply to us to be re-admitted to listing as well as making appropriate arrangements with the operator of the relevant market about its readmission to trading.

The application for re-admission to a regulated market is most likely to trigger the requirement for the issuer to publish a further prospectus. We may suspend listing pending publication of that prospectus if we believe, having considered the information in the market on the target at the time, that there is or may be a disorderly market or it is necessary to protect investors. We will follow this approach in the case of acquisitions by a cash shell or SPAC.

The cash shell or SPAC may apply for its enlarged share capital to be listed under LR 6 when it has completed the acquisition. Alternatively, it may wish to apply to be listed under LR 14. We will assess eligibility in the usual way and if re-admitted under LR 6, the usual rules for premium-listed commercial companies will apply.