

Devolution by Default: The Route to Local Government Reorganisation

Insights and learnings from CEOs who have travelled the path

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01. Introduction

Finding better leaders. Shaping a better society

The English Devolution White Paper heralds the most radical change in the architecture of local government in England since 1974. Local government reorganisation is something that has been on and off the agenda of successive governments for decades. On every previous iteration, GatenbySanderson has been at the forefront, helping to shape and develop new authorities, whilst also working with existing authorities to navigate the uncertainty and change that comes with this process. The current context means the need for these services is likely to be all the more acute as local government looks set to change forever, on a scale and at a pace the sector has never seen.

Having undertaken the majority of new authority set up processes since our inception, we are uniquely and well placed to help local authorities navigate these challenges.

We recently interviewed ten senior leaders from the sector who all had extensive experience of navigating LGR, and who have successfully led new organisations following inception. We are not attributing any comments made to any individual, however we have drawn together in the pages that follow some of the key considerations for those embarking on reorganisation. We hope that you will find their insights useful in helping you to navigate your own organisation through the coming months and years.

We have also included a summary of our services and how they might be able to support you on the next phase of your journey. As always, our experienced Consultants and Partners will be more than happy to provide further detail and insight on any of the matters covering inside this paper, or issues specific to your authority.

Having supported the local government sector through its evolution since our inception in 2002, we are happy to help your organisation moving into the future.



02. Summary Research

Leading through Local Government Reorganisation

Following the publishing of the government's White Paper, we interviewed ten senior local government leaders who had successfully navigated their organisations through LGR. The following is a summary of their advice and specific comments.

Key Findings

- Significant investment of time and energy at the 'front end' should enhance the quality of both the process itself and the end result.
- Reorganisation creates a significant additional workload, but is also a unique opportunity to transform and start from a blank page; acknowledging the organisation alone cannot deliver what is required, and therefore support is needed.
- Addressing complexities and challenges of workforce and leadership engagement is critical to ensuring the success of the process
- Defining organisational culture and priorities should come before setting out the detail of the shape of the new organisation.
- External consultants of various sorts were appointed, often focused on critical but fundamentally basic tasks like blending IT systems and harmonising terms and conditions of employment; additional support around HR was often overlooked, and this frequently led to unnecessary pressure.
- Whilst work will need to be progressed at pace, allow people the time to breath and understand the changes, time to air their views and contribute.
- This is uncharted and very challenging territory for some, and senior leaders will need to use the full range of their capabilities, as well as making appropriate use of external advice, in order to help their people and their organisations navigate these changes.
- Acknowledge that senior leaders and managers are also going through a significant period of change and disruption themselves, which will bring for them uncertainty of their own career.

“
We got some things wrong
but our intent was always
in line with our values.
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What preparations did you undertake in the early stages of the process? How did those preparations impact what came later?

- The majority of respondents did have an organised process to assess the impact on the leadership team. Those that did definitely saw clear benefits in terms of engagement and retention, whilst for those who formed a plan as they went along, there was generally a sense of regret that the impact of these changes had not been appreciated and considered from the start.
- Many respondents placed great emphasis on defining the new culture of the new organisation from the start. Those who did so felt that it was right to shape organisational culture and priorities before determining structure and operating model, and that this paid dividends with the organisation and leadership team that emerged.
- Authentic leadership was seen as critical. Lots of senior leaders were seen as being visible throughout existing and emerging organisations, despite the fact that they were all facing considerable uncertainty themselves
- In all cases, Chief Executives went to great lengths to ensure that staff at all levels were – as far as possible – given reassurance as to the next stage of the journey. Inevitably not all staff bought in to the process, but all Chief Executives did work hard to try to win hearts and minds, even if that was not always successful.
- Multiple respondents made use of external networks, speaking to peers in other organisations who had previously gone through LGR. In many cases, however, this was seen to underline the fact that each authority and each LGR process is different; there is no “one size fits all” approach.
- There were significant challenges recruiting to Chief Executive posts at a time when multiple emerging authorities were doing the same. There were challenges around differences in compensation, differentiation of message, and candidates applying for more than one post.
- Incoming Chief Executives and other senior leaders felt a need for high levels of personal resilience, and in many cases drew on their personal networks to help them develop this. It was felt to be lonely at the top, especially in an organisation at nascent stage.
- All respondents felt that an awareness that mistakes will happen and a willingness to be understanding about and learn from mistakes is critical to a successful process.

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Sometimes we were feeling our way through.... We didn't always have a plan.

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What was the impact on the senior team?

- All respondents commented that whilst they had anticipated a significant workload, the volume of work they had to undertake was greater than they had expected – in many cases considerably greater.
- This in turn led to excessive stress, wellbeing challenges, and burnout; regrettably there were also some departures – either as a result of these issues, or because of an actual or perceived lack of personal opportunity in the new authority.
- Many senior leaders made a point of being visible, and of offering reassurance to the workforce at what was clearly a very uncertain time for themselves as well; in some cases this experience was seen as having been transformative for the individual leaders in terms of developing their own leadership skills.
- Unsurprisingly with multiple senior people applying for the same job, tension amongst existing and emerging leadership teams was seen as common; there was inevitably a sense of disengagement from those who were disappointed in the recruitment process, and many respondents felt that with hindsight this could have planned and managed better.
- There were some regretted departures; whilst there was always a strong possibility of senior leaders in legacy organisations securing a role in those which emerge, there was no guarantee it would be one they wanted.
- Where Member training and guidance around leadership decisions was received, this was seen as welcome and helpful; in some cases only limited advice was sought and that impacted the decisions made.

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Know what your organisational strengths are. Keep doing them and keep shouting about them.

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How did you keep the workforce engaged during a period of uncertainty?

- Several respondents commented that there is a fine line to draw between needing to create a new and distinctive culture whilst also retaining an element of familiarity; others, however, felt that the only way to address the necessary cultural change was to embrace the fact that the new organisation is distinct from those that came before.
- Some respondents commented that workstreams tended to be task focused rather than connecting to people, and with hindsight would place greater emphasis on communications and engagement.
- The importance of Members playing a role in defining the new organisational culture to ensure it reflects communities was also emphasised.
- Others, however, commented that they had derived considerable benefits in terms of workforce engagement and retention through investing heavily in a wide range of communication channels.
- Despite the rise of remote working, the majority of respondents placed great emphasis on face-to-face communication, seeing it as critical to gaining the trust of the workforce.
- A number of respondents spoke of working with specific individuals to use them as champions of the changes that were taking place.
- Within the existing authorities, it was seen as important to recognise organisational strengths, and use those strengths to help carve out a role for the authority and its workforce in helping to shape both the change process and the end result.

What do you wish you knew then that you know now?

- Set out at the beginning the values and culture you want to achieve; having a clear plan and broader strategic direction of travel will make the process more effective and ultimately have a positive impact on what emerges on the other side.
- The right team is critical for success. Get the right people in the right roles from the start – nominate those who can do what you need rather than asking for volunteers.
- Ensure that Members are properly advised regarding key decisions; invest more broadly in ensuring you have the right expertise.
- Invest in systems and process, and start early. Getting to a single version of the truth that everyone can trust will underpin the success of everything that follows. This applies to ICT, digital and HR in particular.
- The process of recruiting to an entirely new senior leadership team will be time-consuming and contentious; do what you can to ensure that this runs as smoothly as possible – for the benefit of Members, officers, and the candidates themselves.
- Seek as much external support as you can, don't underestimate the time and resource that will be needed to make this a success. Place value on independent support from outside the existing organisations.
- Recognise that this will be hard and disruptive; be honest about that fact as a starting point to helping everyone to navigate through to the other side.

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There's no doubt we would have benefited from a clearer plan and better resources.

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03. Why GatenbySanderson

The UK's leadership expert across public services

We find, recruit and develop leaders that shape a better society

As the UK's longest established and largest executive search partner for local government, we have more experience helping local authorities navigate these challenges than any other provider – at every stage of the LGR journey. Whether through identifying new and emerging talent to fill permanent executive roles, securing interim consultants to help with skill gaps and special projects, or helping your existing teams enhance their skills, our experts consultants can help you navigate the challenges and opportunities of LGR.

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A thorough and comprehensive approach. Detailed, considered and effective which resulted in a high quality field of candidates. A really well managed brief. First-class.

Local Government Client, 2024

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This was a really key appointment for us and we felt that we were working in partnership at each stage.

Local Government Client, 2025

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04. Executive search

Unrivalled cross-sector networks and diverse shortlists

We have been finding senior local government leaders since launch in 2002, and have more experience recruiting to Chief Executive and Director posts in the sector than any other provider. We also bring our experience in recruiting to the most senior positions across Central Government, Health, Education, Housing and Not for Profit. In the current climate, we can help you find the right leaders to help your organisation navigate and maximise the changes that are taking place in the sector. Having led the way on executive recruitment for newly created authorities on every previous iteration of LGR, we also understand the type of leaders you will need to help bring new organisations into being, amalgamating all or part of what came before along the way.

Finding the right leader for your organisation isn't just about filling a role, it's about shaping the future of your team and the impact you deliver. Every year, we collaborate with over 500 organisations, running more than 800+ tailored campaigns and connecting with over 4,000 exceptional candidates to help our clients find the best leaders. We're proud to have a 95%+ success rate, in the sector, in placing leaders first time, and more than 70% of our clients return to us for future appointments. These numbers reflect the trust we've built and the results we deliver. When you partner with us, you gain access to a team that's dedicated to understanding your unique needs and ensuring a smooth, successful journey to finding your next leader.

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- 1 in 4 local authorities chose our local government team in 2024
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- We are the preferred provider for the majority of combined authorities
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- We placed 74 Chief Executive and other Executive Leaders across all major professional disciplines in 2024
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- We work across Chief Executive, Social Care, Public Health, Place and Corporate Services
-
- We partner with all authorities: unitary, met, county and district
-
- We are the only provider to bring reach and insight from every sector in public life
-



Frazer Thourard
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05. Interim leadership

Strategic leadership at times of change

We have the largest specialist team of local government interim leadership recruiters in the UK and operate across the sector helping local authority clients with leadership transition and problem solving. Whether helping new authorities embed their leadership teams and establish new organisations, or facilitating the transition from legacy authority, our team will act at pace to solve your leadership challenge. We have worked with emerging and transitioning local authorities for decades and have the networks and the experience to be able to identify and secure the leadership you need for the next phase of your journey.

We are hugely experienced in placing interim leaders who have the gravitas and communication skills to help you deliver transformative agendas. Investing heavily in sourcing, developing and supporting the very best interims, we build strong and personal relationships with them to understand their areas of expertise and link them successfully to our clients. While we place interims at a pace your organisation needs, our process remains comprehensive, and encompasses:

- Initial briefing to define position parameters
- An attraction strategy
- Connecting with our extensive, personal networks
- Leveraging our active C-Level interim database
- A rigorous shortlisting phase
- Thoughtful support through interviews and offer management

Post-placement, our commitment extends to aftercare, ensuring ongoing success through regular progress reviews with both the interim leader and the line manager.

In 2024 we worked with 1 in 4 local authorities, having over 80 interims on assignment each month.



Craig Clarke
Partner



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Partner



Neel Patel
Partner



Abi O'Brien
Senior Consultant



Camille Revuelta
Consultant

06. Leadership & Talent Consultancy

Enabling leaders to reach their full potential

Our Leadership & Talent Consultancy is here to help your organisation thrive. From Leadership and Talent Assessment to Development and Advisory, we offer tailored solutions that meet your unique needs and deliver lasting impact.

Leadership & Talent Assessment	Leadership Development	Board Practice
Volume Assessment	Leadership Development Programmes	Board Review
Executive Profiling	Top Team Development	Board Development
Succession Planning	Executive Coaching	Remuneration
Future Leader Identification	Leadership Development Workshops	Succession planning

Leadership Insight & Benchmarking, 360, Altitude and Behavioural Frameworks

Behavioural & Success Profile Frameworks

As the need to be responsive and to change becomes ever more important for organisations, so too does the need to define what behavioural excellence looks like that will underpin this development. Creating a common language for describing behavioural excellence helps to drive the values, desired culture and ultimately the strategy for your organisation. We have deep expertise in helping organisations design, launch, and embed frameworks that drive the desired culture and strategy.

Volume Assessment

Volume assessment is a common need when going through the process of creating new organisations or departments. This may be assessing external applicants for newly defined roles, or reassessment of existing employees against new role requirements. Our Leadership & Talent Consultancy team have the expertise to deliver an engaging process for existing, or new, candidates in a cost effective and time efficient way.

Executive Team Development

At a time of significant change, Local Authorities require a more collegiate, connected and shared approach to leadership. Organisations need to become more team centric, networked and agile and this starts with the most senior leadership team. Our programme is designed to meet the specific needs of executive teams in newly formed organisations. We have developed four development paths, each with a specific focus and learning outcomes for: New Teams; Team Dynamics; Team Performance; and Strategic Teams.

Leading Transformation

Our workplaces are going through exponential and inexorable change. We find ourselves in environments of ever increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The challenge for leadership and leading has never been more sophisticated. Our 'Leading Change and Transformation' programme is designed to provide a modular blended learning experience based on current and live challenges faced by the participants. The programme includes modules on: leading self; leading others; and embedding change.

Executive Profiling linked to your values

Senior appointments are high stakes decisions, whether the contenders for the role are internal or externally sourced. Where multiple team members are being recruited, we can use psychometric profiling outputs to work with you to ensure the success of the new team – enabling you to consider both culture fit and how individuals can bring diversity of approach. This can include: creating a team profile for existing team members, so that you can see where applicants might complement existing styles and behaviours, or team sessions to support new teams in working effectively together, building psychological safety and helping them to understand each other.

Inclusive Leadership

Inclusivity is fundamental for our growth and development and lays the foundation of psychological safety from which we learn, develop our courage and our voice, contribute and innovate. Our 'Inclusive Leadership' programme is designed to provide a modular blended learning experience based on current and live challenges faced by the participants. The programme includes understanding inclusivity; bias; and psychological safety – all critical during a time of change.

Executive Coaching

Leading in the public sector has never been so volatile and complex with incredible public scrutiny, multiple stakeholder demand and political agendas. Public sector leaders can very quickly fall into 'the paradox of leadership development', triggered by being so busy that leaders have no time to keep their knowledge and skills up to date, which ill prepares them for future unknown challenges. Coaching is a developmentally powerful and performance liberating conversation between an individual and their coach. Critical at times of change. Our 'Executive Coaching' package is designed to provide current leaders with a safe and regular opportunity to address self-growth and development.

Agile Leadership

The challenge of leadership has never been more complex or sophisticated as we experience exponential and inexorable change. This requires a leadership style that can respond with a change of velocity or direction in response to stimulus. This is what we call Agile Leadership and it involves leaders changing speed and allocation of resources quickly to changing trends in their sectors. Our 'Agile Leadership' programme is designed to provide a modular blended learning experience based on current and live challenges faced by the participants.

A commitment to results

The award-winning team at GatenbySanderson truly believe in being a business partner and extension of your organisation to provide the development solutions that deliver results. We invest time up front with every client to discuss and provide development that delivers results for your current and future leaders.

Award Winning Partnerships

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GatenbySanderson truly embodies the spirit of partnership & excellence that EY values. Their contribution not only benefitted our clients, but has also set a benchmark for what we consider to be an exceptional client experience.

Daniel Morgan, EY Supplier Management Team awarding GatenbySanderson their 2024 Client Centric Award, following a 94% approval rating.

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