

What does re-organisation mean within a local authority

We share some of the matters we've been discussing with clients and in our team to help you move decisions on more quickly.

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Lately we have been asked to look at various types of reorganisation within local authorities. From the large structural proposals for unitaries to changes in working practices because of Covid-19. In relation to the second, I wanted to share some of the matters we've been discussing with clients and in our team in case they help you move decisions on more quickly.

Staff

- People are at the heart of any transformation programme and while the move to remote working has been enforced and rapid during lockdown, much of the learning can be translated into other longer-term transformation agendas.
- For the many organisations that want to make elements of the more flexible workforce permanent there is further work to be done, including:
 - reviewing terms of employment to ensure they fit with the organisations plans and offer the right deal to staff in different circumstances;
 - ensuring that risk assessments address the changed physical risks but also the psychological impact of the change, and that consideration is given to the different mitigation measures needed to reduce these risks
 - bringing policies, training and guidance including for employee benefits and support into line with new ways of working. Information and data security are likely to need particular focus with a more dispersed workforce.
- Close cooperation between operational and HR managers will be imperative to ensure that a consistent message is given to all employees. It's a good idea to do some scenario planning to flush out possible pinch points and common concerns. This should limit the risk of claims by employees for unfair treatment or discrimination.
- During the Pandemic some employees will have been asked to move into a different role to support services like community hubs or emergency responses, which many local authorities have established. Transitioning back to their day jobs, will require consideration and careful planning to ensure correct handover of duties between staff and transfer of information to ensure as little disruption as possible.
- All of the above needs to be undertaken with an eye to the public sector equality duty and the impact changes may have on different sections of the staff population. Staff surveys may be one way of better understanding those impacts and may need to be repeated as staff adapt to new ways of working.

Localism

- Changes in the high street (accelerated as a result of covid-19) and in citizen behaviours may mean that place based services become increasingly important in supporting communities. The role of distributed public services in local regeneration plans, and service delivery plans for communities should be considered as part of any revised Local Plan.
- The recent announcements about further local government reorganisation in England gives the perfect opportunity to review how a local authority maintains a presence at a community level and stays connected to all of its citizens. Bringing citizens and, where

necessary, the law (including through the right devolution deals and lobbying for changes to legislation and regulation) on the change journey is what's needed to deliver the best services to empowered communities.

- The role of elected members changed for some local authorities. The need to implement timely and efficient responses to a rapidly changing situation at a time when it was more difficult to maintain democratic processes and procedures necessitated greater reliance on emergency powers and delegated authority being given to senior officers. In the longer term, local authorities will need to revert to more democratic processes. However, they may also wish to reflect on lessons learned during the pandemic and to review their constitutions and schemes of delegation to incorporate more streamlined decision making processes in some service areas based on their experiences.

Tech

- While many local authorities were already beginning to embrace technological solutions to the enduring question of effective direct engagement with communities and citizens, the pandemic has forced local authorities to use digital tools to facilitate remote decision-making and participation in local democratic processes.
- In many local authority areas public awareness of, and participation in, Council, Cabinet and Committee meetings has actually increased during the pandemic as residents embrace the opportunities that new technology provides.
- Elected Members have moved surgeries online, and local authority led community groups have sprung up on a variety of social media platforms, enabling them to communicate with hard to reach and vulnerable groups and making it easier for residents to hold their councillors to account for decisions taken.
- For many local authorities, hybrid meetings of the kind seen during the later stages of the lockdown are likely to become the norm, allowing local authorities to maintain the benefits of in-person meetings while improving accessibility and transparency. Flexibility and adaptability are likely to be critical to success, in both the near future (when local restrictions are likely to be imposed and lifted at short notice) and in the longer term.
- Incorporating smart technology into local development strategies and public space planning are likely to be vital if local authorities are to realise the potential of their communities and places.

Information

- The ability to improve information sharing has demonstrated that information law is not the barrier it is sometimes perceived to be. However, embedding learning from emergency measures into new best practice will require work to ensure appropriate information governance is robust and effective.
- The introduction of new technology and the adoption of consistent standards is often as great a burden as any – a systematic approach to align these over time is needed, including looking at internal policies and standards, but also supplier contracts.
- Local authorities will need to pay particular attention to their codes of conduct to ensure that they properly describe expectations in new online spheres and reflect and address the increasingly blurred line between 'professional' and 'private' conduct in online spaces.
- This is an area in which there's an opportunity for accelerated progress as part of the broader change programme, but where particular care is needed to ensure that standards and protocols are suitable for the 'new normal'.

Integration

Covid 19 has been an accelerator for integration, based on need. This reaches across domains including different public services, tiers of government and public/private provision. Local authorities have shown strength in numbers when coming together to procure and distribute PPE, for example or in delivering the government's 'everybody in' policy.

It links with elements of the broader agenda including devolution, unitisation and health and care integration. It's offered a glimpse of the benefits and challenges of each, and is already leading to debate on what comes next. Without planning to embed current practices then there is a risk that the good work will be lost. But approached in the right way, as seen here, work to build back post-Covid, and embed best practice can either contribute towards an existing direction of travel or be approached in such a way as to permit a range of future strategies.

If you would like to read about structural re-organisation, we have [a guide available here](#).

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