



Trowers & Hamlins' local government series:

Local government reorganisation: bridging the divide



Adele Wylie, Director of Legal & Democratic (Monitoring Officer) – North Northamptonshire Council

Trowers' local government team have been engaging with senior leaders across the sector to explore the myriad of legal, operational and financial

issues from a local government reorganisation. The outcome is our Local Government Reorganisation: Bridging the Divide series – a collection of interviews, publications and roundtables on the topic; combining an exploration of the legal framework, the practical issues that arise and real life lessons from those at the forefront of the reorganisation process.

When did you join North Northamptonshire during the reorganisation process and how was the integration into the legacy organisation managed?

I joined in November 2020 during the shadow period (shadow authorities were set up for North Northamptonshire and West Northamptonshire which were responsible for delivering the two new unitary councils). This was a few months before the transition took place, as North Northamptonshire was established on 1 April 2021.

Due to the reorganisation taking place during the pandemic, the plans for creating the new councils in Northamptonshire was scaled down to a minimum safe and legal standard which meant that the focus was on ensuring that the councils could operate safely and legally from day one.

A team made up of staff from all eight authorities as well as programme management support were driving implementation of critical tasks to make sure that we could operate effectively on day one. Much like an established authority, the Shadow Authorities had governance

structures in place and decisions were made by the Shadow Executives and Authorities. There was still a lot to do when I arrived; in particular there were lots of legal arrangements to put in place with regard to sharing services and splitting system data that was a challenge. There was also the small task of establishing a new governance structure and setting a budget for the new Council. We worked closely with the programme team as well as predecessor council colleagues to ensure that we were ready for day one.

You are now 100 days into your journey at your new Council; can you tell us what you have learnt so far about working within a corporate entity that has not existed before?

That the opportunity is every bit as exciting and challenging as I had envisaged. The chance to influence a new council from the beginning is not something that will happen in many people's careers.

Perhaps not any different to an established organisation but the importance of having a strong and supportive team around you is key. I feel grateful to work with a talented team who are ambitious for the future.

Although the Council is new, most of the staff and elected members are not. Much of the Corporate Leadership Team's time has been spent in getting to know our colleagues and understanding how the predecessor authorities delivered services. As a brand new Council, it is a clean slate but legislation provides that any outstanding matters from the predecessor authorities transfer to the new authority and the complexity of this should not be underestimated.

I think that there was an expectation that when the new authority came into being that we would immediately have fully integrated systems and team structures in place. Although we are keen to move at pace (and we have to if we are to achieve the benefits of reorganisation) we have to manage the expectations of our colleagues and

members in how quickly we can deliver this. In terms of the public, we have always focussed on ensuring that services have not been disrupted and this will continue to be our priority throughout our transformation journey.

With so much to achieve in the first few months, having clear priorities has been critical. The biggest for me has been implementing the governance framework and ensuring that we have all the basics in place.

Do you think there will be a change in the way you interact with people and also work going forwards, given that this can be done virtually and face to face?

The world has obviously changed as a result of the pandemic and like many other organisations we are going to use the learning from the past year and feedback from employees to review how we work and how we can use technology more effectively for the benefit of our residents and our workforce.

From my perspective, our key considerations have to be delivering services that are accessible and responsive and meet the needs of our residents. We also need to maximise effectiveness and efficiency of staff and attract and retain talent. Maximising digital and technology will be key to this and is a crucial part of our transformation strategy. We are an organisation that wants to ensure that we are fit for the future, are digitally ambitious, innovative and are also an employer of choice.

We have a variety of staff delivering a wide range of services to local people and there will not be a one-size-fits-all approach to how our staff work in the future. Digital interaction has worked incredibly well but we also recognise the benefit of face-to-face interaction. Having those interactions with a resident who is frustrated, or colleagues conversing in the kitchen is important; I therefore envisage a flexible hybrid approach to working in the future.

As the director of legal and democratic and the monitoring officer for your council, how did you manage the 2021 elections?

The 2021 elections were the most complex set of polls that the teams had ever dealt with. We undertook the first unitary elections for 78 members, the Police and Crime Commissioner elections (the Returning Officer was also the Police Area Returning Officer for Northamptonshire), the election to 107 Town and Parish Councils and 2 neighbourhood referendums.

There was an additional challenge as transition happened in the middle of the election timetable. We therefore needed to ensure consistent procedures throughout North Northamptonshire but hadn't consolidated the four separate teams or their systems. I created an interim management structure prior to transition to support a one team approach and held regular virtual meetings to align

processes and procedures. The vision was that all our offices would have the same answer, same approach, same forms and same advice.

We chose to undertake verification in the previous area boundaries however, we undertook the counting of all the votes at a large venue that was Covid secure. The count was the first event of the new authority and it was really important that the first impression of North Northamptonshire was amazing and I think this is what we achieved.

What advice would you give about the lessons you have learnt about the local government reorganisation process?

Our process involved not only aggregation of the district and borough councils but also a split of the county council which added complexity. Therefore, working collaboratively with colleagues at the other authority is crucial and continues to be, particularly as many of the services within Northamptonshire continue to be provided jointly.

The complexities of the new authorities agreeing to deliver services jointly until they can be disaggregated should not be underestimated. A lot of work was done to ensure that we had legal agreements, appropriate delegations and performance and budget management mechanisms in place. This work should be started early on in the process; it is never too early to get the lawyers involved.

Whilst a new authority brings lots of opportunities and excitement, there are inevitably matters that will arise from the abolished councils which the new authority will have to deal with. My advice would be to ensure that there are robust processes for understanding any high risk matters within those councils and senior officers should be accountable for resolving as many issues as possible to give the new authority the best start.

If you would like to discuss any of the issues raised in this article in relation to local government reorganisation, please do get in touch

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