

Let's get it on!

Recent announcements about local government reorganisation set my memory racing back to when I was involved in the process that took place in Scotland in the mid-1990s.

From my experience, the time-scale for those expected to have new shadow authorities in place by April and fully functioning replacement organisations a year later is uncomfortably tight.

I was a trainee manager at Strathclyde Region – the biggest authority in Europe at the time the process started – and was seconded into the reorganisation unit of my department. Strathclyde was disaggregated into twelve new authorities. I was ultimately transferred to South Lanarkshire and we had to ensure that there was a seamless transfer of staff and services come vesting day.

Once the 32 shadow authorities were formed, chief executives were appointed and they had sold the elected members their visions and structures, the appointment of chief officers began. And this is where the fun and games started. Despite pay protection, not everyone can be a winner when you are looking at odds of four or five into one. We hadn't quite foreseen the impact and delay caused by appeals or the damage to morale caused by accusations of senior appointments looking after their own, and shafting everyone else in the next tier down.

I saw first hand that the process is infinitely complex and councils have to make tough choices to suit their own particular circumstances. Authorities will either be faced with the pain of creating a lean structure on vesting day with swathes of redundancies or with continuous restructuring over a number of years.

The first option will result in the loss of capacity in the new organisation with many highly experienced staff taking the opportunity to leave. The second means a platoon of senior managers based in a facility known by other staff as 'the departure lounge' or something similar, deployed on special projects.

As we found in Scotland, the skills of experienced managers will be needed. New authorities will be focused on necessities such as creating a new culture, establishing decentralisation strategies, combining I.T. systems and harmonising staff terms and conditions, without the initiative overload faced at present and pressures the new Act may bring.

The first lessons I learned from the reorganisation process in Scotland was to get moving quickly while ensuring adequate consultation takes place. The second was to communicate regularly and well to avoid morale-destroying speculation.

I could go on to recount a whole host of other things I learned during the reorganisation process in Scotland. English authorities in the midst of the painful process could do worse than look across the border for advice on how to do it and how not to.

Paul O'Brien is Chief Executive of the Association for Public Service Excellence.
This comment article first appeared in The MJ August 2007