When Everything Moves at Once

Leadership in local government's era of converging transformation

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There are periods in public life when change is a constant background hum - manageable, familiar, navigable. And then there are periods like this one, when it is not a hum at all but a full convergence: multiple systems moving simultaneously, in different directions, at different speeds, with the connections between them still being worked out. Local government in the UK is living through the latter right now.

In the space of a single electoral cycle, councils in England and their leaders are contending with Local Government Reorganisation on a scale not seen for decades, an accelerating programme of devolution to combined authorities, a significant shift in the national political landscape following the 2024, and the prospect of local elections across the UK in May 2026, together with Elections for the Devolved Nations. All of this in communities that are themselves navigating the aftermath of sustained economic pressure, rising demand and eroding public trust in institutions. Any one of these would be a significant challenge in isolation. Together, they constitute something genuinely different.

Reorganisation without resolution

The LGR process was intended to bring clarity - larger, more resilient unitary authorities with clearer accountability and greater capacity to lead their places. And in time, it possibly may. But right now, in the middle of it, it is producing something different - a period of profound ambiguity in which structures are changing but not yet changed, boundaries are proposed but not yet confirmed, and the people who will lead the new institutions are not yet appointed.

The consequences of this run deeper than the organisational. When boundaries are uncertain, so are political mandates - elected Members are representing communities that may soon belong to a different authority. When structures are unresolved, accountability is contested - who is responsible for what, and to whom? When personnel decisions have not been made, some of the most capable people in an organisation are simultaneously being asked to lead transformation and to navigate their own uncertain futures. The psychological load of that combination is significant and often underestimated.

What the LGR process is surfacing, above all, is the difference between organisations that have genuinely prepared for this kind of complexity and those that have managed their way through calmer conditions and assumed that the same approach would work in turbulent ones. The difference shows - in how senior teams function under pressure, in how honest the conversation is about what is actually happening, and in whether communities feel engaged with the change or done to by it.

Devolution and the reshaping of power

Running alongside LGR, and interacting with it in ways that are not always fully understood, is the devolution agenda. The expansion of combined authorities, the growth of metro mayoral powers, and the emergence of new sub-regional governance structures are fundamentally changing the topology of local government - who holds what power, where decisions are made, and what relationships matter.

This is, on face value, a positive development. Decisions closer to communities, resources aligned with local need, and genuine place-based leadership are the right ambitions. But in practice, the transition creates new complexity before it delivers the promised simplicity. Leaders in reorganising areas are being asked to build relationships with combined authority structures whose own boundaries and powers are still evolving, to align strategies with sub-regional agendas that are not yet fully formed, and to navigate political relationships across tiers of government that are themselves in flux.

Systems thinking - the capacity to understand how different parts of the wider governance system interact and to make decisions that integrate across those boundaries rather than optimise within them - has never been more relevant. And yet it is precisely the kind of leadership that time pressure, structural uncertainty and internal preoccupation tend to crowd out.

A changed political landscape

Successive General Elections brought significant shifts at national level, and its effects are still working their way through the local government system. A new government means new policy

priorities, new relationships between Whitehall and town hall, and new expectations about what local government is for and how it will be supported - or not - in delivering it.

At the local level, political change has its own texture. Councils that have been under sustained political control for many years are seeing that control challenged or reversed. Administrations that are newly formed are navigating the specific difficulties of leading complex organisations without the institutional knowledge that comes with time. And in many areas, the LGR process is compounding the political uncertainty: Members are being asked to invest in building something new at precisely the moment when their own electoral future is unclear.

The May 2026 elections add a further layer. In areas of England undergoing reorganisation, these may be among the last elections to existing councils - which changes the dynamic in ways that are sometimes difficult to acknowledge openly. It raises the questions that sit, often unspoken, beneath the surface of many leadership conversations: whose political culture will survive into the new authority? Which communities will feel their voice has been strengthened or diminished? What does genuine democratic accountability look like in a system that is still being designed?

The challenges this creates for leaders

In working with senior leaders in local government over many years, and in the research that underpins the our frameworks at Avanti, a consistent set of challenges emerge when systems undergo this kind of compound transformation. They are worth naming directly.

The first is the temptation of false certainty. When everything is genuinely uncertain, there is a powerful pull towards projecting confidence that is not warranted - to simplify the story, to give people answers that are not yet available, to speak as if the direction is clearer than it is. The leaders managing complexity best resist this. They communicate honestly about what is known and unknown. They distinguish between the things they can control and those they cannot. They build trust not by pretending to have answers but by demonstrating that they will face the questions honestly.

The second is the risk of team fragmentation. Compound change puts enormous pressure on senior teams. Different members of a team – both Cabinet colleagues and senior officer peers - will experience the uncertainty differently, will have different appetites for the risks involved, and will be navigating their own professional anxieties alongside the corporate leadership task.

Without the active investment of a team in its own functioning - its shared direction, its capacity for honest challenge, its willingness to name what is not working - the pressure tends to pull teams apart rather than together. The disciplines of high-performing senior leadership matter most when they are hardest to sustain.

The third is the danger of losing the community. The communities that local government serves are themselves navigating uncertainty - about what reorganisation means for their services, their representation, and their sense of place.

The risk in a period of intense internal focus is that the external conversation gets managed rather than held - communities are communicated at rather than engaged with, consultation becomes a process to be completed rather than a genuine source of intelligence. The leaders doing this well are

treating communities as active partners in making sense of change, not as recipients of decisions already made.

What this moment asks of leadership

There is no version of local government leadership right now that is comfortable or straightforward. The convergence of reorganisation, devolution and political change has created conditions of genuine systemic complexity, not complicated problems that yield to sufficient analysis, but genuinely complex situations where the relationships between elements are uncertain, the outcomes cannot be fully predicted, and the path forward has to be navigated rather than planned.

What that demands, in our experience, is not a different set of technical competences but a different quality of team. Teams that can maintain a shared direction without pretending the uncertainty does not exist. Teams that have built enough psychological safety to say what they really think, including the things that are difficult to say — without it fracturing the relationships that make them functional.

Teams that can draw on the full diversity of their thinking, rather than defaulting to the cognitive styles of the most senior or most confident members. And teams that can engage communities and partners as genuine sources of intelligence about what the system needs, not as audiences for decisions already taken.

None of this is straightforward. All of it is possible. And the organisations that invest in it now — before the pressure peaks — will be significantly better placed to lead their places through whatever

comes next.

The map has changed. The question now is whether the new authorities that have inherited it are prepared to do the work of truly understanding what — and who — is on it.