

Supporting Scrutiny through LGR

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What we did:

Combined

- Bournemouth Borough Council (unitary)
- Borough of Poole Council (unitary)
- Christchurch Borough Council (district)
- Parts of Dorset County Council (county)

into

- BCP Council

Formal work began in October 2017, with vesting day in May 2019 - Just 19 months to transition

- Dorset Council and other local authorities in the west Dorset area underwent the same process.
- End result: nine authorities merged into two to serve the whole Dorset area.

LGR Timeline

- Oct 2017: [Pre-Shadow BCP Joint Committee](#) established and formal work commenced
- 25 May 2018 [The Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole \(Structural Changes\) Order 2018](#) was made.
- 26 May 2018: Shadow Authority established
 - No elections held for the SA.
 - SA had 125 councillors - all councillors of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole plus those of Dorset County representing the electoral divisions within the boundary of the proposed BCP Council area.
 - Included bodies of [Shadow Authority](#) (full council), [Shadow Executive](#), [Shadow O&S](#), [Shadow Senior Appointments Committee](#)
 - Workstreams of the SA – review implementation plan, prepare budget requirements and set final budget and council tax for the new authority, appoint key officers.
 - SA existed until fourth day after the elections of BCP Council.
- August 2018 - Judicial Review against LGR instigated by Christchurch Borough Council dismissed by High Court
- 1 April 2019 - BCP Council 'Vesting Day' (All 125 Shadow councillors remained until the elections).
- 2 May 2019 - BCP Council elections.

The importance of scrutiny through the LGR journey

- **Transparency** – for non-Exec councillors, staff and residents.
- **Formal test and challenge** of fast-paced development
- **Trust building** – new member cohort, new geographical area. Developing a ‘BCP’ mindset.
- **Developing good scrutiny practices** for the new authority.
- **Refocussing scrutiny priorities** and encouraging working at more strategic levels & across the geographical area.

Scrutiny timeline (1)

Pre-Shadow Phase – Bournemouth Borough Council established a new LGR O&S Committee.

- Bournemouth only membership.
- Met monthly, tracking meetings of the Pre-Shadow Joint Committee.
- Scrutinised reports of the Joint Committee as it developed Shadow Authority plans- recs direct to Joint Committee
- Received monthly updates from PH relating to LGR
- Established a working group on risks relating to LGR.
- Initiated joint working with other authorities on future O&S arrangements (CfGS support).
- Disbanded when Shadow O&S was established.
- Resourcing - another O&S committee removed to provide resource; priorities across O&S function adjust to focus on LGR.
- Fulfilled important role in keeping wider membership informed and providing transparency to the work of Joint committee and its working groups. Particularly important in earlier days of uncertainty.

Scrutiny timeline (2)

- Shadow phase - Shadow O&S Committee established.
 - Membership drawn from Shadow Authority (ie. all 125 preceding council members).
 - Met monthly, tracking Shadow Executive committee.
 - Formally scrutinised reports of the Shadow Executive committee and made recommendations.
 - Limited focus on Shadow Authority activity only – other preceding authority scrutiny continued separately.
 - Continued regular updates on LGR from portfolio holder/ senior officers.
 - Established rapporteurs to link to Shadow Exec working groups and report on activity/ red flags.
 - Used a risk lens to prioritise work- early CfGS workshops to gain consensus
 - Established a working group to develop BCP scrutiny arrangements.
 - Collated scrutiny priorities of the preceding authorities to provide continuity into the new Council.

Scrutiny timeline (3)

- New BCP Council established
 - First O&S meeting two months after Vesting Day
 - Structure - O&S Board (monthly) tracking Cabinet plus x 2 O&S committees (children and adults, 6 meetings/year).
 - Similar pace and style of scrutiny to previous two years, strong focus on Exec test and challenge, very limited proactive scrutiny.
 - Huge level of activity in 24 months. Transformation phase of LGR took place after Vesting: services fundamentally reviewed, with scrutiny members requesting input.
 - Member drive to scrutinise nearly all Cabinet reports - additional monthly meetings quickly added to calendar.
 - Risk focus continued, but everything was considered by members to be high risk....
 - Highly politically charged scrutiny seen for the first BCP Council term.

The BCP Political Dimension

- Strong conservative majority in all predecessor councils
- Wider and more local political representation triggered by LGR
- Inaugural BCP election resulted in no overall control.
 - Conservative losses – in response to LGR?
 - many councillors stood to represent new political groups from their local area – ‘Rainbow Alliance’.
 - finely balanced with councillors walking the floor and resulting in administration changes.
 - 3 changes of administration, and 5 council leaders over 6 years since Vesting.
- Significant impact on scrutiny
 - 5 O&S Board chair changes
 - 3 scrutiny structure changes
 - Strong opposition voice and organic drive for scrutiny.
 - Scrutiny in reactive mode as council priorities changed.
- No overall control remains today
 - 8 political groups, plus unaligned members, but a greater majority is now held by the administration.
 - Scrutiny has moved to stable and building mode, as more political stability has been secured.
 - Scrutiny now embedding good practices, developing culture and working more productively with Executive.

Lessons learned

- **Agility** – O&S must keep pace with progress to be valuable. Consider a rapporteur model to gain an overview of activity.
- **Resourcing** - Be realistic with your resource to support O&S – demands likely to grow. Reprioritise through the journey.
- **Advocating for scrutiny arrangements** - Aim for experienced scrutiny members to develop these if possible.
- **Stay rooted in good scrutiny practices.** – Member preferences will differ across authorities. Rely on statutory guidance.
- **Consensus building to establish an impactful scrutiny lens and work programme** - Early investment in this will reap rewards
- **Political / local dimension** - Political and geographical challenge will affect scrutiny.
- **Plan for unknowns post vesting day** - Potential for change in political landscape of your area as local interests are promoted. Arm scrutiny structure with agility to respond. Quarterly meetings are likely to be insufficient.
- **Focus on culture over structure** - Exec/ O&S protocol? Aim to promote effective working practices from the outset. Beware of 'shadow cabinet' potential.
- **Schedule regular reviews** - Annual reviews to move scrutiny out of response mode when appropriate.
- **Work with the experts** – CfGS/ LGA – independent voices help.
- **Opportunity** – reinvigorate scrutiny practices and gain experience.

