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## BLOG

# New councillors, New leadership and dealing with “no overall control



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*The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny's Ed Hammond writes on the support that councils might need from a governance perspective:*



Two months on from the local elections we have an opportunity to take stock. New administrations are finding their feet. New councillors are attending their first cycle of formal meetings (and hopefully not being put off in the process). Senior officers are getting used to working with new Cabinets – and vice versa.

It may seem, for many, that things are “settling down”. But we can't be complacent about the way that shifts in political control – and in particular a shift to “no overall control” – impact on the way that governance, decision-making and scrutiny are managed.

This is not so much an issue about the constitution, its processes and systems, as one about culture – political objectives, expectations of how people will work together, and people getting used to new roles. The last of these can often be the most difficult – particularly for members of the outgoing administration. It will feel jarring to find that easy access to senior officers has suddenly ended – and to see those officers now working closely with your political opposition. For new administrations too there may be a lingering suspicion – these officers were working to further

our opponents' priorities and objectives a matter of weeks ago. How can we trust, or expect, them to smoothly adapt to the way that we want to work?

Setting out mutual expectations at the outset is a really important part of being able to work productively. New Leaders will need to set expectations with Chief Executives and chief officers – how will members lead and direct? What are the expectations on officer advice? When and how will important matters be escalated to Cabinet members' in-trays – avoiding the risk of a disproportionate focus on operational activity?

Importantly, too, how will the organisation now deploy resources to implement the new administration's priorities? The shift may be slight in some areas, major in others. Does the authority have the capacity to bring about these changes? What does it mean for the budget and MTFs, agreed under a previous administration?

These questions and issues are writ large for a coalition or politically-mixed administration. There, parties and individual members will need to think about member-member agreements, not just member-officer. How will we translate our agreement on coalition, or political co-operation, into practical decisions? How will Cabinet work – how will we hold each other to account? How will we deal with disagreements? It can be best to try to work through these issues “in principle” before problems emerge.

Arrangements for scrutiny may need review as well. Former Cabinet members may find themselves as scrutiny chairs – raising challenges around conflicts of interest. There may be a risk that scrutiny shifts to feeling more political – or an influx of new members could lead to a shift in doing scrutiny differently. We have seen, after elections, scrutiny in some authorities becoming more focused – moving to zero in on the policy development priorities of a new administration or to play a bigger role in monitoring performance.

Finally – it's important (for officers, in particular) not to see changes of political control as an annoyance, or an obstacle to “business as usual”. It is the most fundamental part of the political process, and central to local democracy. It's an integral part of the job – and the tension and disruption it can produce provides a vital mechanism by which the council and its work can stay fresh and relevant. It challenges assumptions and shakes up old ways of working. But to make it work requires active engagement and, sometimes, tough conversations – about leadership, responsibility and accountability.

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*The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny works closely with the LGA, with the Association of Democratic Services Officers and with Lawyers in Local Government to promote and support councils on matters relating to corporate governance and democracy.*