

Blog: Local Authority Chief Executives: from endangered to extinct?

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Last week brought the news that yet another chief executive role is being abolished – this time it's LGC's mystery columnist. This follows plans by Wiltshire and Hastings to get rid of theirs. What can be driving this? Not performance, surely. Cost perhaps – but the chief executive's salary is a drop in the ocean in terms of what many councils need to save over the next three years. What then is going on?

Perhaps there's some competitive element – with leaders wanting to be seen as tougher than the rest. Perhaps there is a notion that there's nothing much to the job and anyone – even a Leader could do it in their spare time.

Leaving aside what the jettisoning of a recently recruited, high performing chief executive says about the quality of political decision making, what does it say about the sector? You can work hard – long hours and high stress, do very well, improve your authority, hand all the credit to politicians and then be given the old heave-ho. Will the bright, ambitious graduates currently studying with us still think local government is the career for them?

Where are politicians looking for their inspiration? History? At INLOGOV we've been working with local authorities for forty five years and no-one can remember a successful example of a chief executive-less authority but tales are still told in some councils which tried it of the chaos and silo-thinking that ensued. Mr Pickles perhaps? Well he does think the chief executive role is a non-job – but you'll note he has appointed a very effective former chief executive as his Permanent Secretary to ensure DCLG runs smoothly. The private sector, maybe? Well, it's true that some companies do have a combined chairman and chief executive – News Corporation and Rupert Murdoch for example – but is that an example councils want to follow?

What could possibly go wrong without a chief executive? A leadership vacuum leading to unbridled rivalries between directors, poor staff morale and performance and a breakdown in partnership relationships, for starters. And what will the implications be for governance? 'Not good' seems to be the most likely answer. Who will be left who has the confidence and authority to tell a leader they are wrong? Who will speak truth to power?

The best performing councils usually have a strong and effective leader who is complemented and supported by a strong and effective chief executive. It is that powerful combination of political and managerial leadership that enables a council to thrive and to weather the storms.

Chief executives' importance and influence is much wider than their councils. They work across all the agencies, bringing people together, brokering partnership working and creative thinking and ameliorating political differences – on behalf of their leader. A local authority without a chief executive is like an orchestra without a conductor. It doesn't matter how skilled the individual musicians are. The end result will be awful.

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