



# Unitary - The Buckinghamshire experience

Roger Goodes

Service Director - Partnerships, Policy and Communications  
(Formerly Programme Director for Unitary Programme)

March 2024



# Buckinghamshire

- Pre-Unitary – 1 county and 4 districts (2 with shared officer team).
- Population of 553,300 (as of mid-2021).
- 604 square miles.
- 5<sup>th</sup> largest County Unitary.
- 236 schools including pupil referral units and local authority-maintained nurseries.
- 32% designated green belt (England average 12.5%).
- 171 parish and town councils.



# Our unitary story

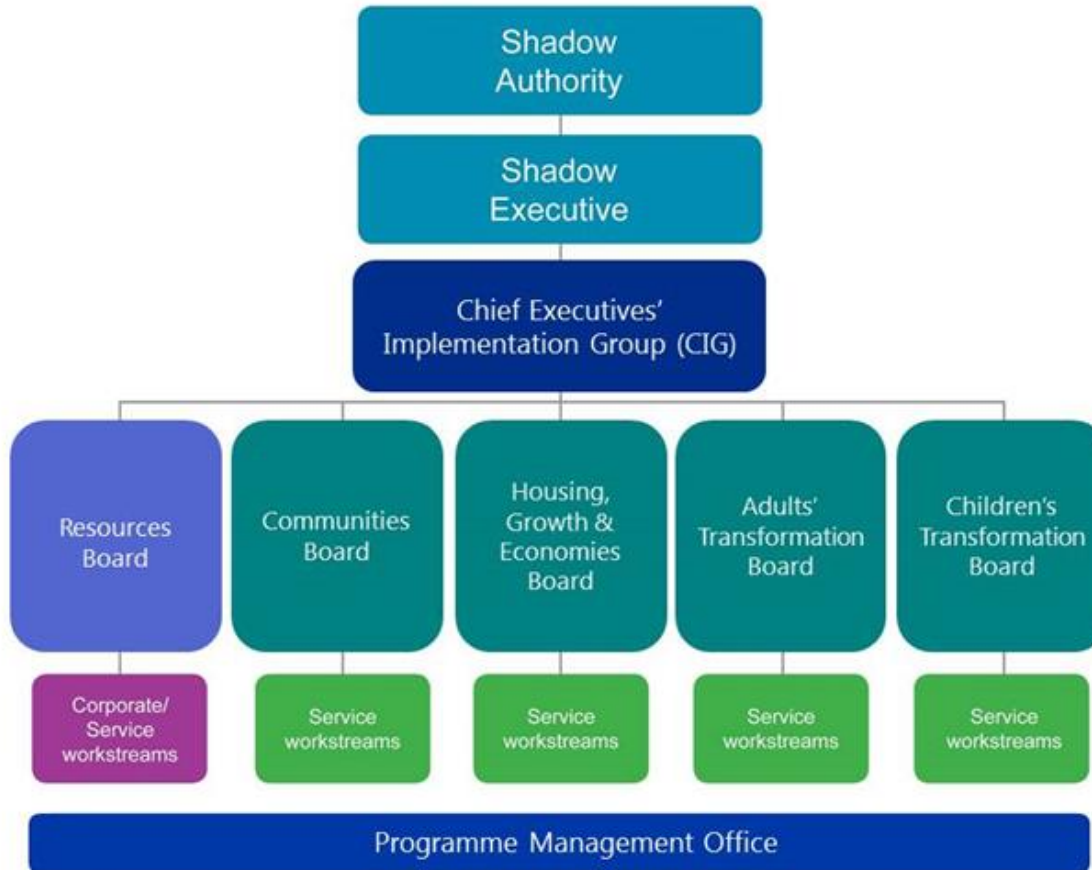
- Ceremonial county impacted by change in the 70s with the formation of unitary councils in Milton Keynes and Slough.
- A unitary bid for remaining area covered by Buckinghamshire County Council was considered in 2007 but was not progressed, instead we became a Two-Tier Pathfinder pilot.
- In 2016, following an announcement by one of our district councils to apply for Unitary status, splitting the county up, the then County Council agreed to develop a business case for a single unitary council in Buckinghamshire.
- The County Council submitted its options appraisal and business case for a single unitary council to government in September 2016.

'No change' is  
the highest risk  
strategy...

# Timetable

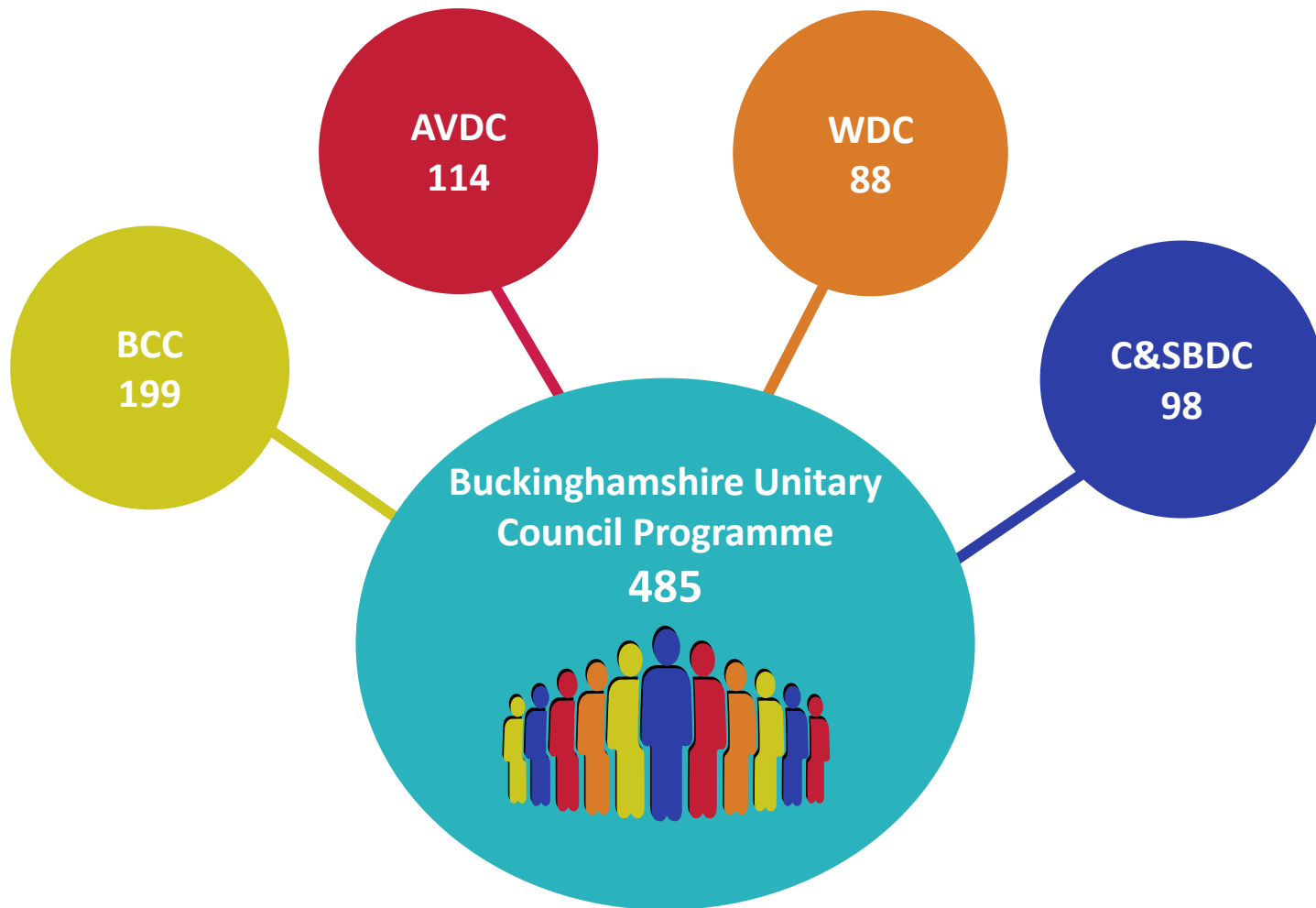
Date	Key Milestone
September 2016	Submission of Proposal for single Unitary Council
12 March 2018	Secretary of State Minded to Decision - Period for comment
25 May 2018	Close of period for stakeholder responses - Period of reflection by Government
1 November 2018	Final decision by Secretary of State
23 May 2019	Structural change order laid
3 June 2019	Shadow Authority meeting
3 June 2019	Implementation Executive formally established with legal powers to lead the transition
July 2019	Recruitment of Chief Executive
Oct – Dec 2019	Recruitment of Senior Management Team
1 April 2020	Vesting Day
7 May 2020	Date elections for new Council would have been held
May 2021	Date elections for new Council will be held

# Programme Governance



- Programme structure included existing County Council boards looking at Adults' and Children's transformation.
- Three 'new' boards jointly chaired by County and District Officers.
- A total of 18 functional workstreams sat under boards.
- Small Programme Management Office – 16 staff drawn from across all five councils.
- Additional capacity brought in as required by an external partner (Critical Friend) - @£350k spent.

# Unitary Programme Team



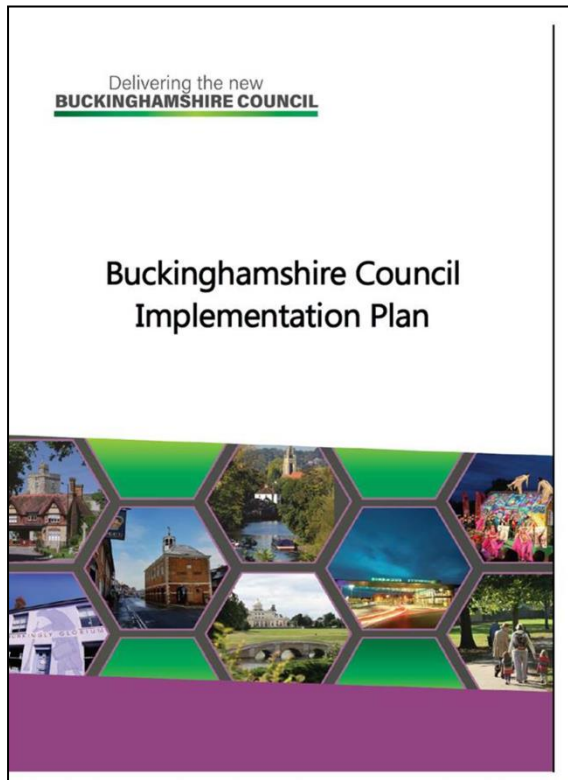
Note - Backfilling of staff focussed on business as usual activity to allow staff to work on creating new council!

# Programme Management Office

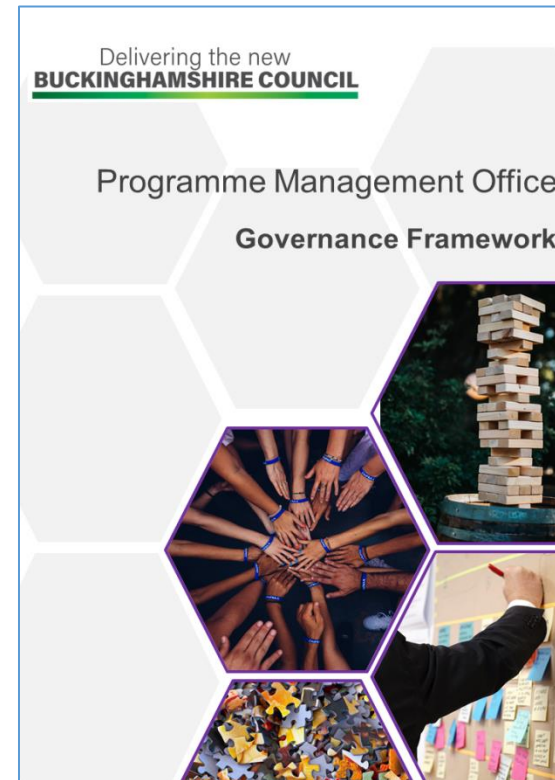
- Way of working – touch downs, forward plans, issues escalation.
- Update reporting – Shadow Executive, Chief Executives Implementation Group, Scrutiny, MHCLG.
- Co-leads appointed - worked in some areas but not others; need to be swift to spot and address when things aren't going well.
- In total we had 129 'Must Haves' and 432 'Critical Milestones'.



# Programme Management – Implementation Plan and Governance



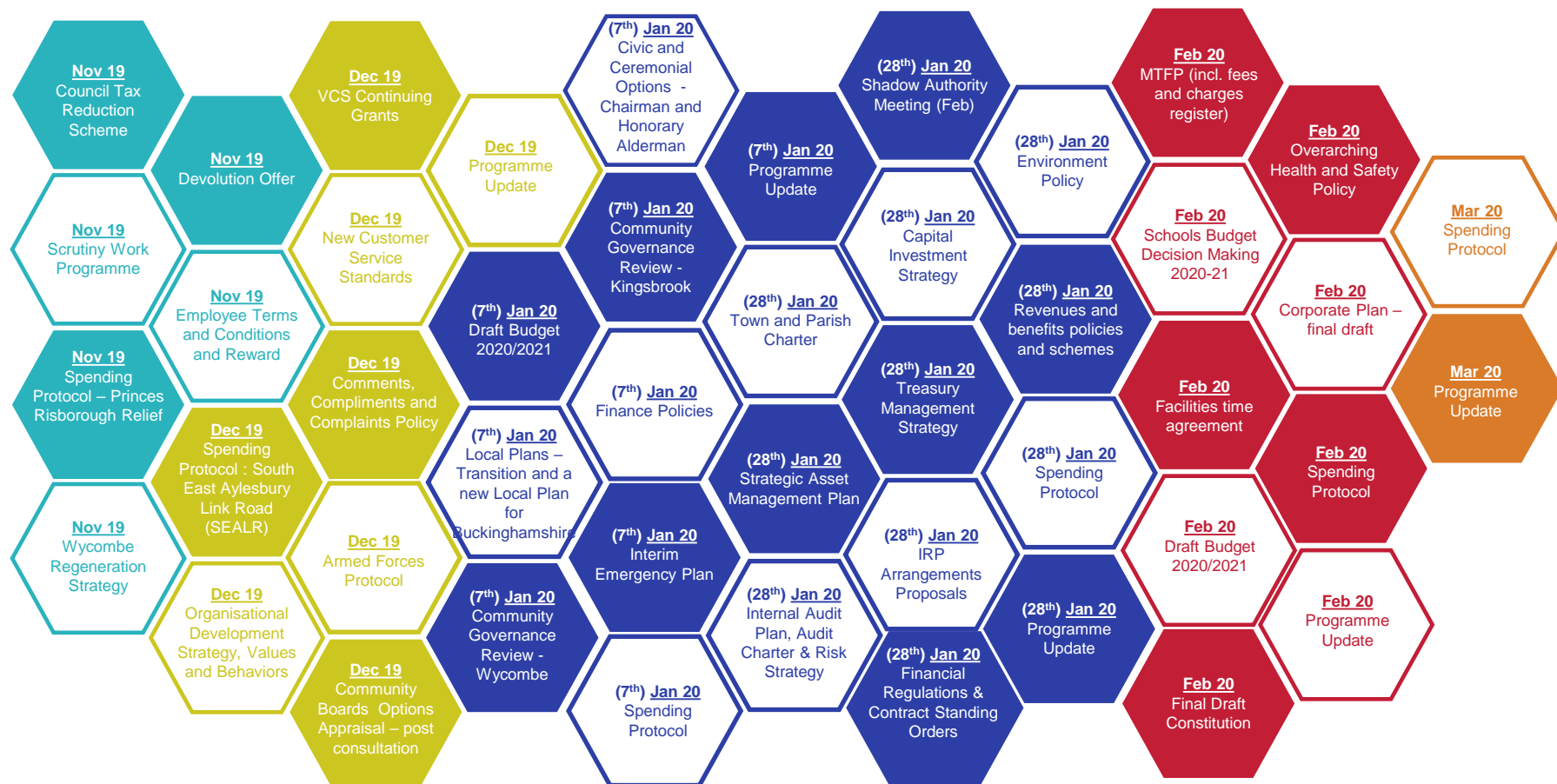
**Public Document agreed by  
Shadow Executive**



**Internal Document agreed by  
Chief Executives  
Implementation Group**



# A snapshot of the Shadow Executive forward plan



## Shadow Executive met weekly

# 1 April 2020 – The launch of the new council



Exactly 9 days after Lockdown!

# So, what did this mean...

- 202 elected members which only reduced to 147 members in 2021 (the largest elected body outside of Parliament).
- Cabinet of 17.
- Teams brigaded together on 'Teams'.
- A budget using a 'golden staple'.
- Slower implementation of service harmonisation.
- Staff 'Coming Together' events cancelled.
- Not quite the start we had promised our residents.....



# However...

- Identification of service directors and brigading at the end of 2019 gave staff certainty.
- Continuity of interagency relationships at a managerial and political level enabled a strong Covid response.
- All of us united against Covid and did what we needed to do.
- Teams enabled a level and frequency of staff engagement never before seen (and continued to this day).
- Have continued to deal with the challenges and opportunities of 'Big Ticket' items including HS2, East-West Rail, and the Housing Infrastructure Fund.



## OUR RESPONSE TO CORONAVIRUS



Best Practice

Emergency Response Structure

Support Hubs

Mutual Aid

Supporting the Voluntary Sector

Supporting the Community

Communications



# We were also able to...

- Launch and complete a review of our Better Buckinghamshire programme which showed employees had positive relationships with managers where they felt trusted to do their jobs.
- Converge terms and conditions of staff. 84% of staff are on Buckinghamshire Council conditions as at the 26 February 2024.
- Begin a parallel programme of cross cutting improvement activity – e.g. digital, electronic surveillance, debt advice, legacy data maintenance, storage.
- Complete work to harmonise 54 key IT systems down to 17 including Revenues and Benefits, Electoral Services, Customer Services and Legal Services.





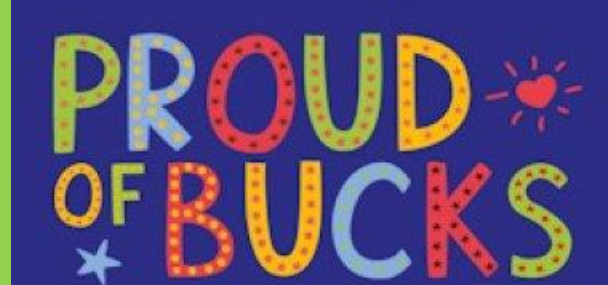
## Community Boards

- Introduce a programme to harmonise policies, fees and charges. 150 key policies / strategies have been updated since April 2020, including the 70 statutory policies that the Council is obliged deliver.
- Launch our 16 Community Boards.
- Implement a management development programme - Being a Bucks Manager.
- Reinforce and where necessary establish new county wide and local partnerships with external partners.



# A council that celebrates a one-council culture

- Developing a one-council culture.
- Created a workforce engaged and bought into the new organisation...78% of staff saying happy to be working for Buckinghamshire Council (against an external benchmark of 67%), 87% have a positive working relationship with their manager (against an external benchmark of 79%).
- Developed a tailored Member Induction Programme, which later reverted to a Member Development Programme to enable continued development and support to Members.



# Financial Overview

## Implementation budget

- Original Budget **£22.2m**.
- Spent **£19.5m** - PMO, localities work, legal costs, branding, redundancy, HR and Finance support.
- Established a transformation budget of **£17m** (including balance of £2.7m from pre-unitary implementation budget).

## Savings

- Original business case **£18m**.
- We have achieved £45m savings, with a further £30.4m savings being delivered 2023/24.
- £75.4m over our first 4 years (17.1% of net 2020/21 budget).



# Implementation considerations

- The word 'take over' will come up regularly – be ready to tackle these concerns.
- Continually refer to the 'new' council.
- Understand the ongoing and pending financial commitments.
- Don't try and do too much, it's about transition, transformation comes later!
- Make sure your implementation team is balanced between the different councils, consider joint leadership.
- Get your senior leadership team appointed to at least Tier 3 before vesting day!

**Your Buckinghamshire, your council  
A better future together**



# Reflections...

- Lots of learning re process of becoming a unitary.
  - Build into your business case detailed proposals for implementation, including timing of elections and whether you wish to have a continuing authority – will feature in the statutory instruments.
  - Need to be able to ensure councils can undertake robust due diligence when becoming a unitary – you will be held to the detail of your business case, even if the world has changed.
  - Be prepared for the unexpected and need to respond at short notice.
  - Relationships can be challenging – remain resilient.
- Many challenges since 2020 have brought into sharp relief the benefits of being Unitary e.g. Ukraine response with housing, environmental health and children's services all working alongside each other.
- Ability to work with strategic partners and respond collectively is simpler and more agile.



Thank you

