

LGR-
The Buckinghamshire
Experience of becoming
Unitary Council



Key Differences

- ▶ It's a new council, not a 'take over' or 'balkanisation'
- ▶ Wherever you come from the responsibilities are much bigger and new e.g. Planning, Housing or Social Care
- ▶ The finances are potentially far larger and driven by statutory requirements
- ▶ A 'small fish in a bigger pond' or a bigger role with wider responsibilities?
- ▶ Name of the new authority?
- ▶ Location of new authority
- ▶ Creating a new 'culture' that is none of the past

Managing Change:

- ▶ In the fast pace of transition be clear what you want to focus upon as members
- ▶ Leadership of transition- political and officer
- ▶ Financial plans- need sceptical approach
- ▶ Spending decisions and 'pet projects'
- ▶ Structural change order- critical negotiation
- ▶ Make sure that your Implementation team is drawn from all heritage councils
- ▶ Ensure the senior Leadership team is in place BEFORE vesting day
- ▶ Shadow Authority role
- ▶ Scrutiny



Don't try and do too much, it's about transition, transformation comes later!

Preparing to become a unitary councillor

- ▶ Avoid 'the bunker'- embrace change!
- ▶ Reject 'them' and 'us' mindset
- ▶ Read the papers/ Reports
- ▶ Embrace the finances!
- ▶ Meet the new senior member/officer teams
- ▶ Constructive role at Shadow Authority
- ▶ Scrutiny is vital



Key Risks

- ▶ Waring factions - 'it's different here because...'
- ▶ Putting in place the senior Leadership team (CEO, plus first two lines critical)
- ▶ Officer flight
- ▶ Financials
- ▶ IT systems
- ▶ Identify essential Policies
- ▶ 'Safe and Legal'
- ▶ Keep in regular touch with MHCLG



Communications with Public was key (pre, during and post)

- ▶ Communication with the public- be their local champions through transition (although few will really care!)
- ▶ Local committees and local planning?
- ▶ But also with:
 - ▶ Other members
 - ▶ Staff-regular forum
 - ▶ Partners
 - ▶ Town and parish councils
 - ▶ MPs

Be ready for hostile and aggressive responses from a range of stakeholders plus on line, including a criticism of council services

Be prepared for:

- ▶ False starts as national political priorities change
- ▶ Requests for additional information
- ▶ The need to get swift legal opinion and advice- have a barrister on speed dial



New considerations for LGR 2025/6

- ▶ The role of the Strategic Authority v the new council?
- ▶ Who will sit on the SA and what roles will they have?
- ▶ Weighted voting?
- ▶ Scrutiny at SA level?
- ▶ The role of the Mayor- Chair or Executive?
- ▶ Collective finances for the new SA- how much will the council lose?
- ▶ Potential fiscal devolution?
- ▶ Voting; casting, majority or unanimous?
- ▶ Hyperlocal governance?



Buckinghamshire in 2016

- ▶ County Council and 4 District Councils
- ▶ 1997- Milton Keynes Unitary
- ▶ 169 Town and parish councils
- ▶ Coterminous CCG, LEP, VCS
- ▶ 528,000 population – projected to grow fast
- ▶ £395m combines net budget.
- ▶ Unitary bid followed one DC applying for unitary status leaving rest of county unviable

Boldly Going...

- ▶ 2016- bid
- ▶ 2018- 'minded to' and 'confirmatory' announcements
- ▶ 2020- go live (9 days after Covid!)
- ▶ 2020-2021 236 councillors on Shadow Authority
seats-202 members (157 Conservative)
- ▶ 2021 - elections for new council

Implementation considerations

- ▶ Continually refer to the 'new' council, not the past
- ▶ Election timings
- ▶ Understand ongoing and pending financial commitments