

# **Creating the conditions for change at Milton Keynes City Council.**

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Chief Executive, Milton Keynes City Council

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# Milton Keynes at a glance.

## The fastest growing city in the South-East

298,200 people call Milton Keynes home



## More ethnically diverse than the South-East

All ethnic groups other than White British combined make up 49.9% of school pupils (37.8% of all age residents)



## A strong local economy

Our GVA is 32% higher than national average, average weekly earnings £779, compared to £704 South East average.

## Political control usually shared

No overall control since 2006

Labour control since 2022

Cllr Pete Marland has led the council for the last 12 years



## The youngest city in the South-East

26% of our residents are aged 0-19. Although our local birth rate is static, many children move here with their families

## Education and skills are improving

Pupil attainment at Key Stage 2 and 4 is in line with England. Despite not having an undergraduate university, 35.8% of residents have a Level 4 qualification compared to 33.8% across England overall

## But we struggle with housing affordability

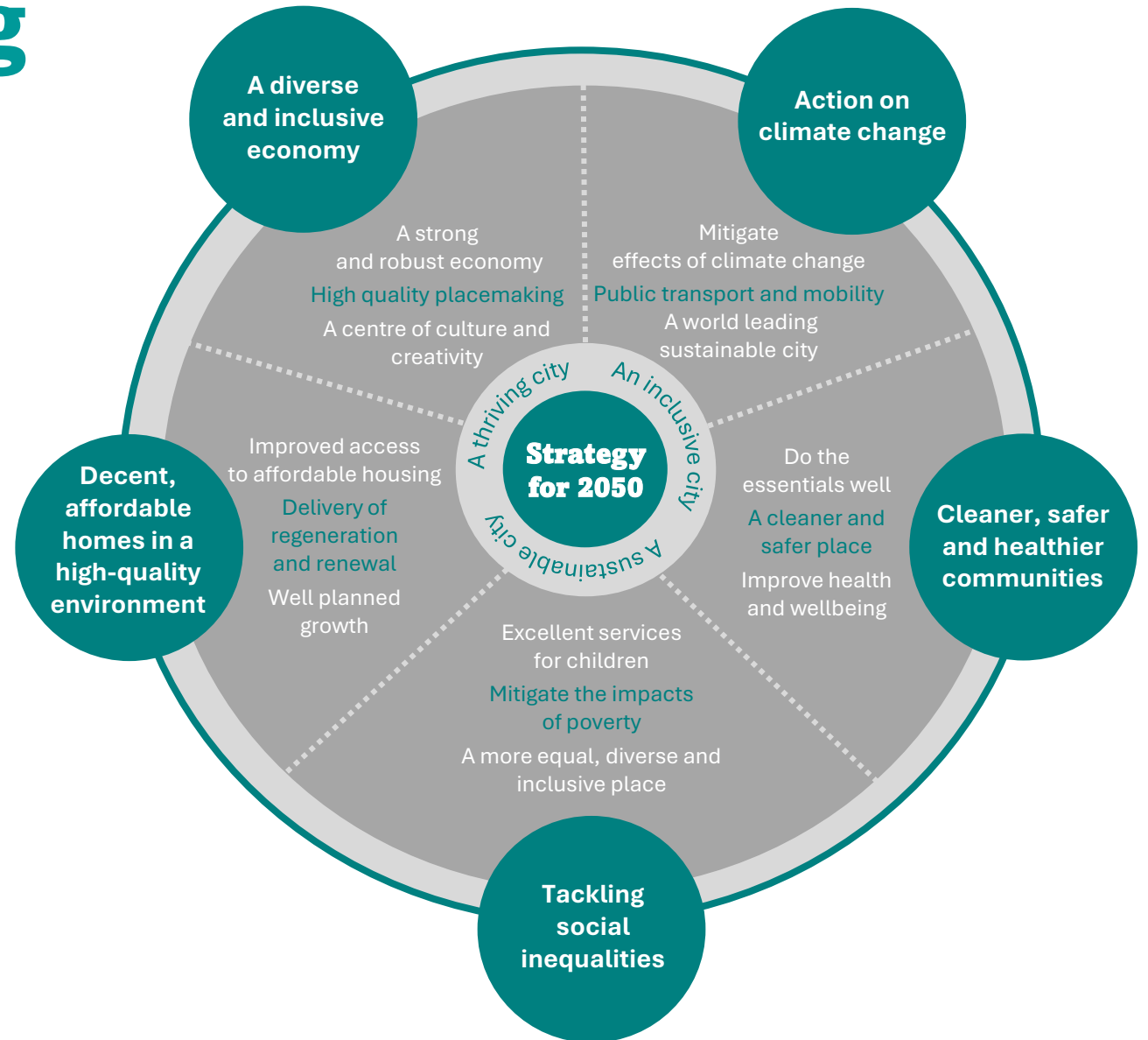
### More people rent than elsewhere

39% of households rent, compared to the South-East (32.9%)

We have over 1,100 homeless households



# What we are trying to achieve.



# How are things going.

## Consistently good quality services



All our inspected services, including adult services, children's services and residential care homes are now rated 'good' or better by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission.

## High performing and well run



In 2025, our LGA Peer Challenge concluded we were 'high performing and well run' and our external auditors issued a 'no significant weakness' value-for-money judgment.

## Caring for our environment



In 2025 we achieved the biggest rise in recycling rates of any place in England, leapfrogging dozens of other areas to become one of the country's greenest recycling cities.

## Aiming high for our next generation



We're now number two in the South-East of England for families accessing free early years education. Two-year-old childcare take up is 14% above national average.

## Building homes for the future



For the seventh consecutive year we have exceeded our government target for building new homes, with 2,351 new homes built in Milton Keynes in the last twelve months.

**But it hasn't always  
been this way.**

# How we created the conditions for change.



1

We have met our organisation where it is, not where we might want it to be, and **built our relationship there**

2

We have tried hard to **protect the conditions** for creativity and risk taking

# Meeting our organisation where it is.



We use a **clear and honest** style of communication that reflects most people's perception of reality.



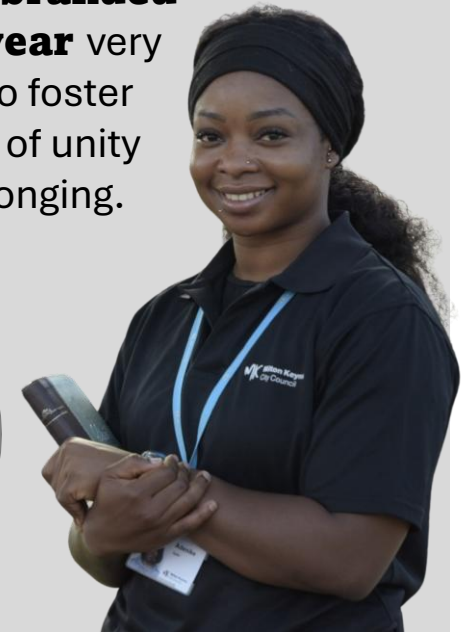
We don't use annual appraisals or service plans, instead **using processes that work for us** in our context.



We use **video with personality**, live and pre-recorded, to help colleagues connect with key leaders and make issues **more relatable**.

We actively reinforce our values through friendly **CLT Awards** not a large corporate events as a result of feedback **colleagues didn't like it**.

We use **branded workwear** very widely to foster a sense of unity and belonging.



# Meeting our organisation where it is.

2025 Pulse 2025

88% of colleagues would recommend us as a place to work



## What do our colleagues say?

Headlines from our last large scale (1,369) colleague survey, in 2024, compared to 2021

Colleagues say they are more engaged than they were in 2021

9 in 10 of our colleagues feel proud to work for the city council

Colleagues better understand their roles and feel more empowered

Colleagues say their managers provide more support and challenge now

More colleagues feel they have a better work/life balance now

Health is an area where colleagues say more could be done to help

## The external view

The peer team observed that the council's assertion of being a transformation-minded organisation is strongly evident across all levels. Staff consistently feel empowered to drive change and improve their service areas, with a sense of freedom and autonomy to innovate, with staff reporting **'we have the freedom and autonomy to be creative, to try things and it be OK to fail'**. This cultural foundation positions the council to deliver on local priorities and pursue future improvements, showcasing a robust capacity for continuous development.

LGA Peer Corporate Challenge, March 2025

**What empowered  
colleagues do for us.**



## Vic's work on assessment backlog

Vic job is Head of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEN)

By January 2025, 350 EHCP assessments were overdue due to increased demand and team vacancies, leading to overspending on daily-rate educational psychologists to reduce the backlog.

- Vic's team took a decision to not fill our vacancies, instead let a new contract for assessment services.
- They outsourced 45 assessments per month initially to speed up report production at lower cost.
- The team provided templates, quality assurance, and support to ensure reports that met our needs.

350

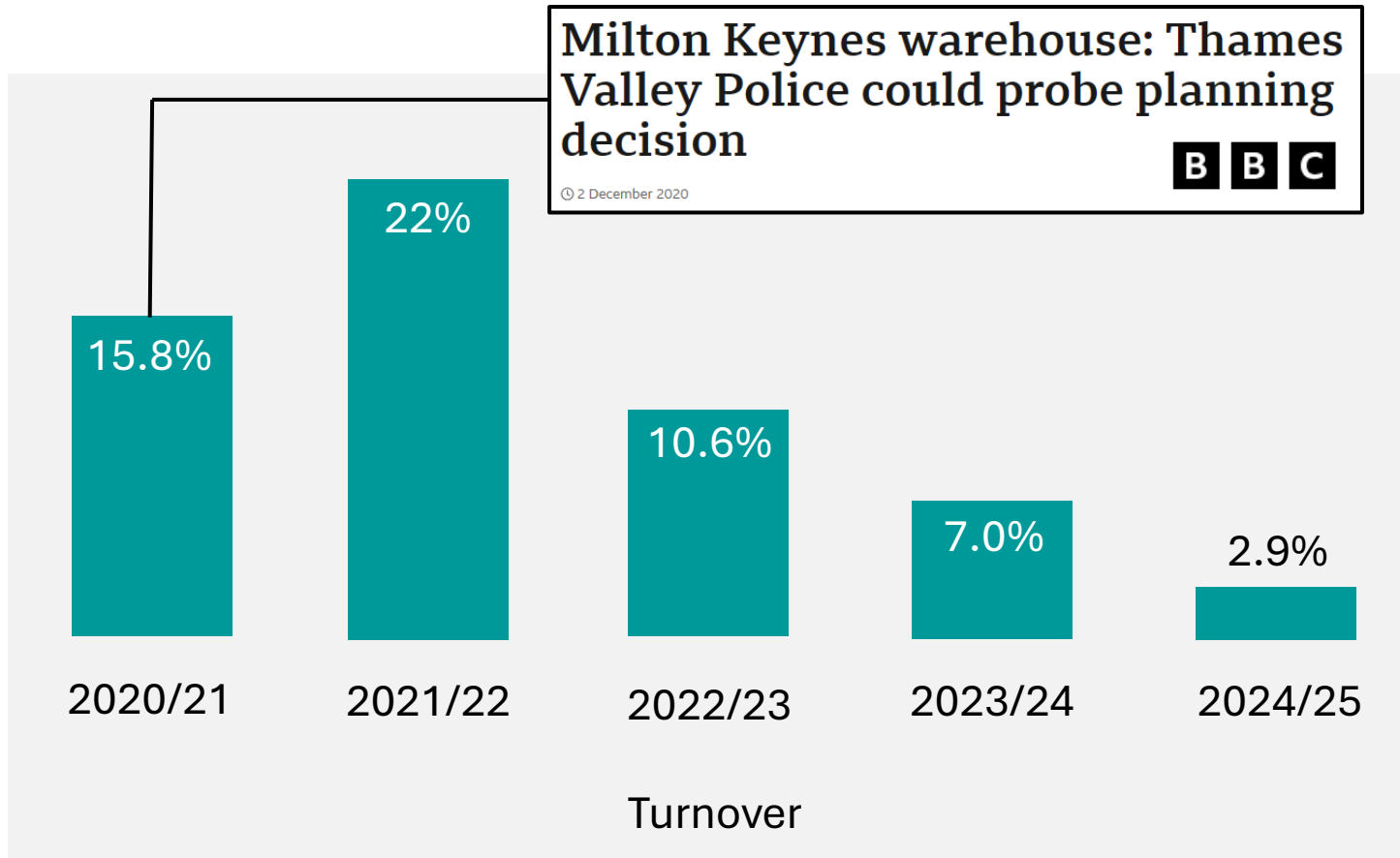
53

Remaining educational psychologists have been able to do more prevention and development work



# Jon's work on building up a team

Jon's job is Head of Planning



- Worked with the team to innovate and enhance systems and processes, **embracing their ideas** to drive improvements, like moving some work to non-planners.
- Sought out **constructive feedback** through an internal planning improvement board and LGA Peer Challenge.
- Raised standards by hiring and retaining talent and **fostering a positive workplace culture**.
- Bought younger people in to the team by launching a brand-new **Planning Academy**.



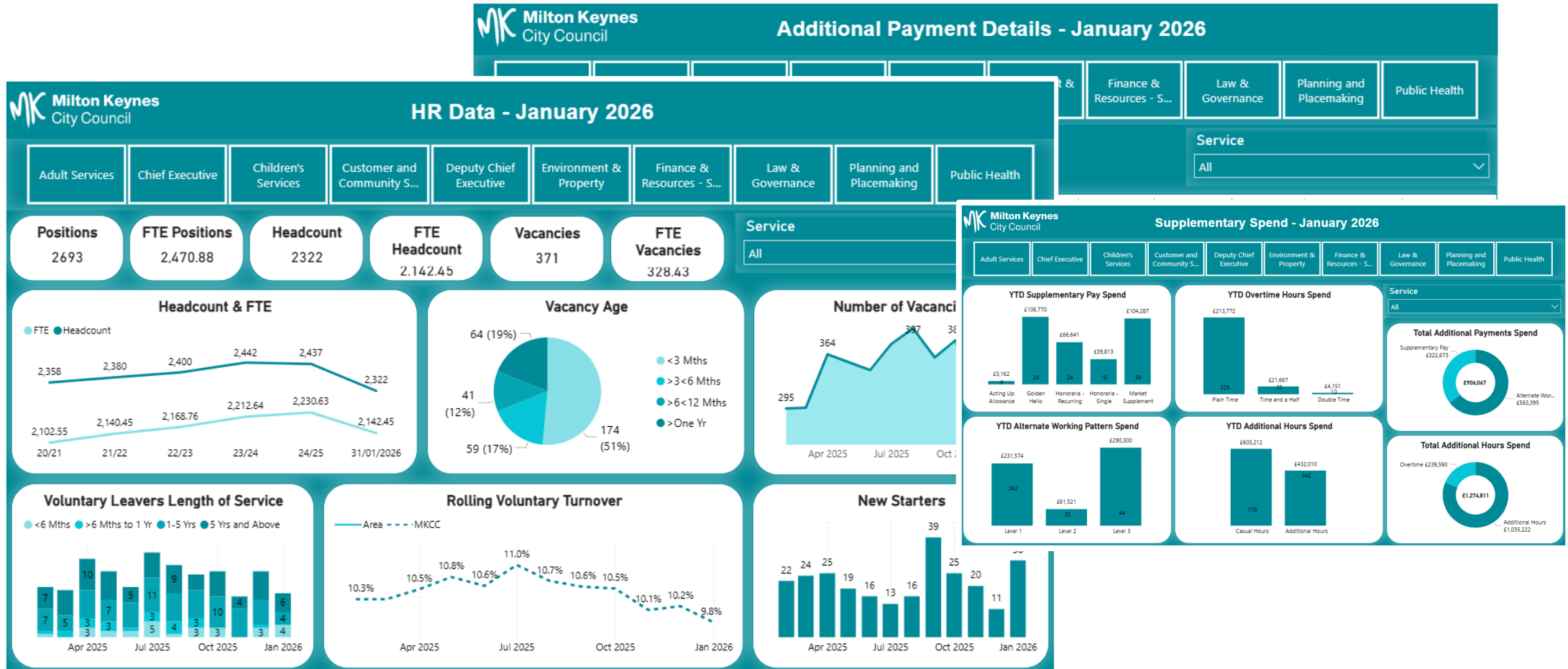
Madi and Jacob completed Level 7 Chartered Town Planner apprenticeships through our Planning Academy

NATIONAL APPRENTICESHIP WEEK 2026



# Heather's work on an HR Dashboard

Heather's job is Workforce Performance Officer





### **Jo Smart, Community Safety**

We were getting a lot of community triggers (an anti social behaviour legal mechanism) and so Jo came up with the idea of adding a new stage in the local process to prevent things from getting to this stage in the first place, working with partners to reduce the number of cases meeting the threshold and improving joint working on neighbour anti social behaviour.



### **Alina Vizireanu, GIS (geographic information system)**

Our new planning system was seamlessly integrated with the existing GIS platform, enabling both teams to collaborate more efficiently using a unified set of spatial data. Rather than hiring consultants, the GIS team formed a focused group that delivered the integration successfully - and in a highly cost-effective manner.



### **Tina Price, Family Centres**

Noticing high numbers of children with speech and language needs, Tina took initiative to get children's centre workers trained to conduct early Speech and Language screening assessments to aid fast track referrals to NHS therapists. Each of our centres now has a knowledgeable champion, trained for free by the NHS, with referrals going both ways.

# Meeting our organisation where it is.

## Recap: How we engaged colleagues in delivering change

Our favourable conditions have helped us build a strong shared purpose

By retaining our top leaders, the message is we're all invested.  
*Only 1 in 50 is an interim*

Acting like a bigger small organisation has fostered greater ownership by our colleagues

Staying well out of the doom loop by controlling the financial narrative

Promoting a culture of self-sufficiency, using paid consultants only if absolutely necessary

Giving colleagues permission to act and access to the tools they need

Recognise the everyday improvements not just the bigger wins

Offer multiple ways for colleagues to get involved

**Protecting the  
conditions for creativity  
and risk taking.**

# Protecting the conditions for creativity and risk taking.

Firstly, we need to recognise our sector's starting points:

## Councils generally have a default risk averse culture

- Partly because we work in a controlled, regulation heavy environment
- Also, because our work is often conducted in full public glare
- And scrutiny can come too soon, and expectations can be unrealistic.

## New ideas can often struggle to land

- Not everyone is interested in change, perhaps they joined a council for that reason
- We don't have a traditional reward structure – change relies on committed public servants
- Not all leaders are energised with the opportunity and challenge of change

# Protecting the conditions for creativity and risk taking.

What we think are the conditions for creativity and risk



1. Find better ways to carry out universal business functions
2. Reduce management costs and increase team productivity
3. Reflect industry-standard practices in customer contact
4. Reduce our wage bill by offering different working patterns
5. Diversifying foster care
6. Reduce the repeat removals of infants into care
7. Smarter commissioning
8. Reviewing directly provided social care services
9. Using fines and charges to change behaviour

**Colleague led and owned**

**Constructive challenge**

**Careful implementation**

**Enabling governance**

# Protecting the conditions for creativity and risk taking.

## Constructive challenge

- Respectful environment
- Avoid 'groupthink'
- Time to talk ideas through
- 'Court of public opinion'

## Enabling governance

- Supportive board
- Proportionate paperwork
- Allow for change
- Show flexibility on targets

# Where do new ideas come from anyway?

Discovery

**10% of people are already buying holiday each year**

Challenge

**How do you get cash out of gains in productivity?**

**The South Cambridgeshire Council four-day week experience**

Learning from elsewhere



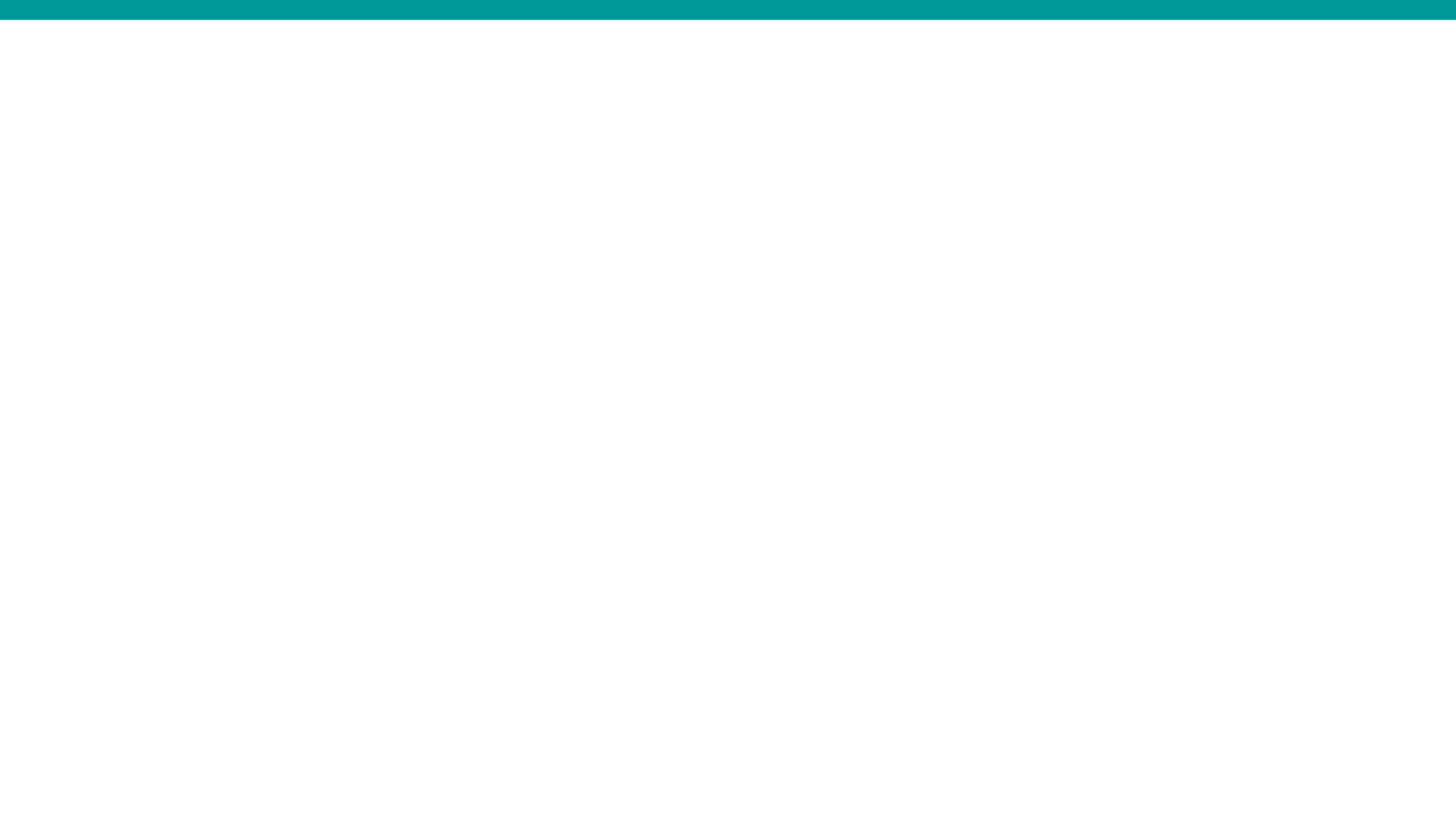
Reduce our wage bill by offering different working patterns

**Political support**

**Research**

**Options and refinement**

**'Time for You'  
Enhanced annual leave buy back**



**What happens when  
it's is safe to take risks.**



# Peter's work on polling reforms

Peter's job is Electoral Services Manager

## Flexible Voting Pilot

With voter turnout in Milton Keynes falling over the last three elections, Peter and his team jumped at the chance to modernise the system, and the organisation backed them up.

Milton Keynes will now be the first place in England where residents can choose to vote at and use a convenient city-centre hub instead of their assigned polling station, supported by live, digital registers to prevent fraud.



**And colleagues think  
bigger and better.**



# The takeaways from our experience.

Don't underestimate how important building an **authentic** sense of purpose is to transformation

Without the **right corporate and political conditions** for creativity and risk taking, transformation gains will be limited

Have **high expectations** of what your colleagues can do

It is the key to sustainable change (and holding on to great colleagues)

**Thank you for listening.**

Michael Bracey

Chief Executive, Milton Keynes City Council