

LGR-
The Buckinghamshire
experience of becoming
a unitary councillor



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 online, 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 (SA) 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