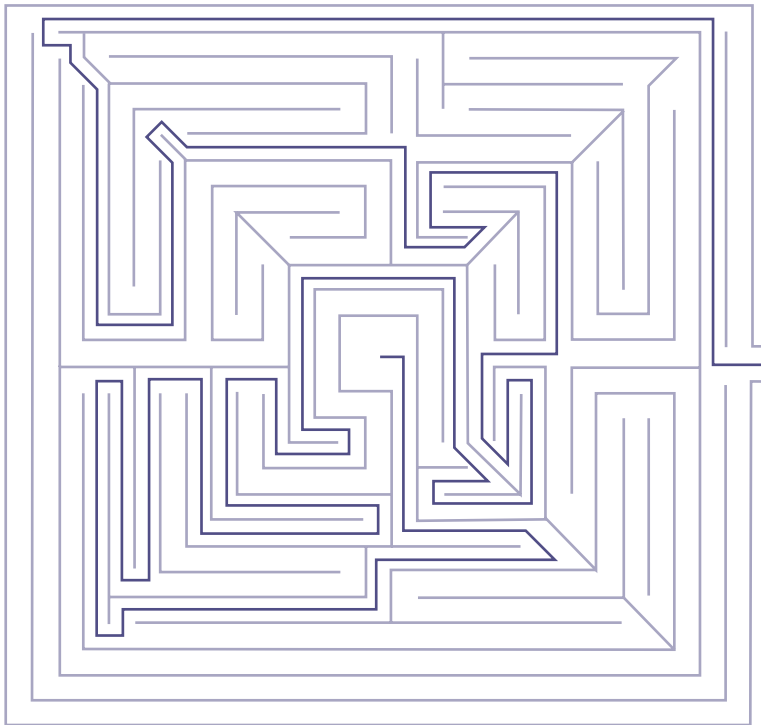


# gearing up for change: preparing for the new unitary councils





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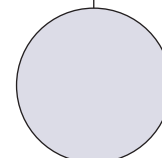
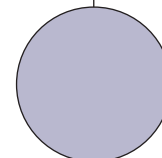
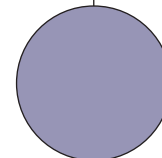
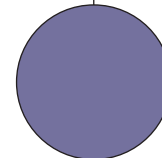
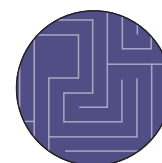
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### acknowledgements

This publication is made possible because of the insight and expertise of council leaders with first-hand experience of restructuring. We would like to thank all those who gave their time to be interviewed as well as others who have commented on the text.

The document is intended to provide a point of reference, rather than prescriptive solutions, to the complex issues involved in unitary re-organisation.

A series of 'viewpoints' from named individual leading councillors are included in the report. In addition, we include a series of 'if only' panels which reflect the experience of other councillors. These 'if only' quotes are a blend of different experiences and, thus, are published on a non-attributable basis.



*Gearing up for change* is for councillors in areas where new unitary local government structures are being planned. It is aimed at council leaders, senior members and overview and scrutiny councillors involved in the changes. However it will also be of relevance to other councillors as well as to chief executives and senior managers. It draws on the experiences of members and officers with direct experience of previous local government reorganisation.

Leaders and elected members will be in a variety of situations. Some will be in the vanguard of change. Others may oppose restructuring. Many will be uncertain that they will have an elected position in the new council. Others may not wish to seek re-election and will be looking to exit from their councillor role. Whatever their situation, all have an existing electoral mandate and have a potentially important and constructive part to play in restructuring.

This publication is a starting point, emphasising key questions and building blocks. It draws on the lessons of the last round of reorganisations while acknowledging the current round involves some new and different features which have no precedent. It is intended to be a catalyst for discussion and for sharing ideas, insights and experiences. It does not assume that there is any one right answer in all cases and for all places. Each local situation is different but the practical questions, scenarios and viewpoints included in this document will, hopefully, provide a reference point for making a success of restructuring in your council area.

It will be of vital importance for councillors of the new unitary authorities to invest time early on to define their long term vision, identify the opportunities that restructuring gives them, and agree the direction and outcomes they want to achieve. They need to paint a picture of what the area and localities that they serve will look like in ten years' time, what kind of public services will be needed and, in turn, what the new council will need to look like to fit this vision.

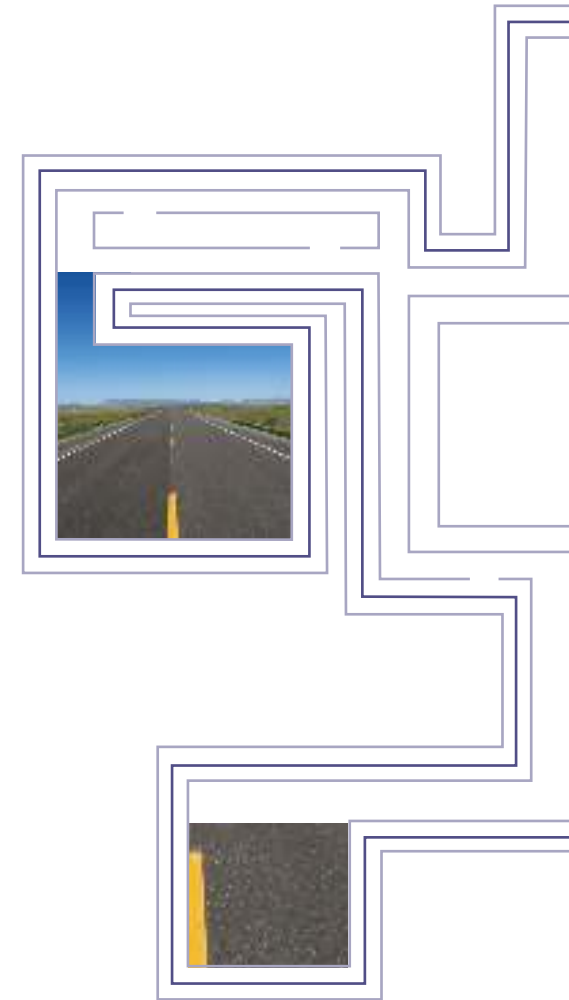
The new unitary councils are being created at a time of opportunity for local government. Local government is centre stage in a complex cross agency working environment. Councils have the chance to take a lead in shaping the future of their localities and ensuring that public services as a whole, not just local government services, are geared to the needs of the local area. These 'place shaping' and joint agency agendas are the canvas for restructuring.

The importance of elected members setting the pace and defining their vision ahead of the restructuring process can't be overstated. The restructuring process, once underway, can become quite mechanistic. If the process rather than the vision becomes the shaper, restructuring runs the danger of being organisationally-driven rather than truly serving the needs of local people and communities. Elected members may find things are set in process that become very difficult to change.

The vision needs to be rooted in clear benefits and improved outcomes for local people and communities. It is likely to start from a vision for the area and the contribution needed from local public services as a whole and, from there, take a view on some of the key interfaces between services such as health, education, community safety, social care etc. that, in turn, will have implications for the shape and way of working of the new council.

The vision needs to include a commitment to identify and build on excellence, wherever that may be. This means looking beyond the CPA good and excellent categories and being aware of pockets of excellence in weaker predecessor authorities as well, indeed, as looking at excellence from outside the new unitary council. The vision will certainly be driven by a strong awareness of the diversity within the area and what that may imply for devolved decision-making, town or parish councils, neighbourhood and community participation.

Communicating the vision must not be forgotten. A majority of company mergers and acquisitions, for example, fail to achieve their objectives. Often this is because there is a failure to connect the leadership's vision for the new organisation to concrete action by the people in the frontline of the organisation who must make it a reality. The same is true in public services.



1. do you know what you want your area, and the various localities within it, to look like in 10 years' time? what implications does this have for the shape of local public services and the relationships with partnerships in the area?
2. are you taking time, early on, to bring all councillors together to form a vision of the new council in the light of your vision for the area? are you involving the communities, stakeholders and partners who will be part of its future achievement?
3. are you making use of existing data and intelligence on your local communities to drive and inform the vision? similarly, are you using existing data on public services to identify the reforms that are necessary?
4. how will you make sure the vision continuously drives the restructuring process and is not blown off course? have you recognised the role that overview and scrutiny councillors can play here? are there measurable milestones by which you and the electorate will be able to judge progress?



“If only we’d...

...carved out more time early on for the big picture stuff and being clear about the political priorities that need to lead the change. It is important that the councillors get together now and define those priorities. For example, if you as politicians believe that there should be maximum empowerment to town councils or through some other mechanism you need to be clear about that now and insist that your officers, new and old, deliver it. Otherwise, you’ll end up in the new council being told ‘we can’t really do anything now for five years because we’ve just changed everything and we can’t change it again.’”

Following local government reorganisation in 1998, Stephen Parnaby was elected leader of the new East Riding unitary council. The new council comprised of four districts and 40% of the county. Stephen Parnaby emphasises the importance of a forward-looking focus.

**what was the main challenge you faced?**

Putting five organisations together into one is a significant undertaking. The main challenge for us was finance and getting the financial aspects right. If you get your financial situation correct, everything follows from that.

**how do you respond successfully to that challenge?**

You need to get both members and officers to agree a complete new culture. It's not a case of the county council taking over districts or districts becoming the forefront of the new authority. It is a brand new authority. That's what you need to focus on. Recognise that it is a brand new authority and don't carry old baggage with you. I'm an old Member from 1979 and the previous reorganisation in 1974 never actually lost that baggage until the reorganisation in 1996. There were still people saying 'it was good in the old days', 'we used to do this' and 'we used to do that'. You're not there to look back or think the organisation is an end in itself. You're there for the residents. I had been Leader of Beverley Borough Council and I used to give myself a mental slap on the wrist every time I mentioned Beverley Borough Council.

**a new culture sounds fine in theory but how do you make it a reality?**

We moved quickly to get members and officers together and sign up to what were our priorities. We told ourselves 'forget what's gone on in the past. What are our priorities now? What do we want to be?' In our case, it was customer focus, education, value for money and good financial systems. Of course it will be different for different authorities. But whatever it is, state them clearly and see them through. If you get new priorities, rather than bringing them forward from old authorities, you'll quickly see a new culture and a new regime.

**is there anything that, with the benefit of hindsight, you'd have done differently?**

Looking back, I'd have wanted us to communicate better with residents. We've got our communications right now but we didn't have it right in the first place. And don't be frightened about spending money on communicating with your customers and your residents because, at the end of the day, they're the people who matter.

securing commitment from residents, stakeholders and staff

Any new organisation or change is likely to be better if as many people as possible are behind it. Ultimately, it is not systems, processes or restructuring that make results happen but people. Effective leadership is vital for winning the hearts, minds and commitment of those people who are going to be instrumental in achieving successful outcomes for the communities the new council serves.

The first leadership challenge will be to handle the differing attitudes of existing councillors to the change. Progress towards the new structure will, inevitably, be either helped or hindered by the attitudes of the councils that are being replaced. Pro-active engagement with existing councillors will be an important part of paving the way for restructuring as will seeking councillors with a range of previous district and county experience to stand for election to the new council. The change is

also an opportunity to improve the diversity of council membership.

It is likely that some members and staff will be disaffected. Such councillors and officers, of course, have a choice of opposing the restructuring or making the most of it. A key consideration for members will be to ensure that their duty to represent the best interests of their ward or division is maintained. Holding a view that the proposed restructuring is not the best course is, of course, a legitimate expression of that but it should not be incompatible with making a positive, active and constructive contribution to the actual restructuring that is taking place.

Leadership resources will need to be invested in bridge-building activities among different groups and between different types of council. Often there are cultural and, in some cases, relationship chasms between, for example, district and county councillors as well as between different sides of the restructuring debate.

In some areas, the move to a unitary structure is likely to involve the transfer of functions to existing (continuing) authorities rather than the creation of new authorities. It will be important to avoid both the appearance and the reality of a takeover by the continuing authority. Such a route is unlikely to make the most of the opportunities of restructuring. Leaders in the existing authority need to be bold enough to make it clear that they intend to shape the new structure in the way that best serves their wider goals of place-shaping rather than settling for the status quo.

In other areas, 'shadow authorities' (with elected or appointed members) may be created to prepare for restructuring. Leadership within this 'shadow authority' needs to consider the best mechanism for ensuring that all affected councils have a voice in shaping the new authority.

In all cases, investing time to secure the commitment and support of staff, partners, stakeholders and the wider public will be vital. A situational approach needs to be taken to this communications and relationship work, recognising that different 'constituencies' will have different levels of interests and different concerns. The general public's main interest, for example, will be about their council tax level and the reliability of the services they use. Staff and service partners, on the other hand, will have a much deeper interest and will be looking for clarity over the general direction of change, a clear timetable, the removal of uncertainty and ways to be engaged in the process.



1. are you engaging in robust dialogue early on with the different parties to the restructuring to agree a shared approach? where there is opposition, have you nonetheless maximised the potential for constructive engagement?
2. do you understand existing organisational cultural differences and are you using this to inform how you champion the new vision, new expectations and sense of purpose?
3. what leadership model will be right for the new council? are you holding early discussions on the type of leadership arrangement that will work best – a directly elected mayor, a directly elected executive of councillors, or a leader elected by their fellow-councillors with a clear four year mandate? what electoral model needs to accompany this? have you considered how this change will impact existing tradition and ceremonies that people may want to hold onto?
4. what mechanisms can you use to involve relevant people effectively in key aspects of restructuring? have you considered, for example, using 'green paper/ white paper-like' consultative processes, fast-tracking these where necessary?



“If only we’d...

...looked at the long-term and been more hard-nosed as leaders about some of the assets we took over. We were given a municipal tip with ten years life left in it. Ten years sounds an awfully long time but, of course, you have to start preparing within five years to close it. Then you have to find the money to pay for its closure and, because it’s been going a long time, you find you’ve got pollution issues. Pretty soon, you realise you should not have taken it on in the first place or, at least, you should have entered into an agreement on the decommissioning costs.”

Bracknell Forest became a unitary council along its existing boundaries in 1998, taking on responsibilities for its area previously discharged by Berkshire County Council. The background to the restructuring, however, was hard fought and included court cases. Council leader, Paul Bettison, looks back at the process.

**the background context must have made things difficult?**

It was but we had a great pioneering spirit amongst the six new unitary authorities that were being formed. We were able to put political differences to one side, and that was helped very much by the fact that, of the six unitaries, two were in Conservative control, two were Labour and two were Liberal Democrat.

**what tips would you pass on to others?**

First, put aside the squabbles that have gone on. Set those aside. You have now what you have and you need to play the new game. Don't argue about how you got to where you are. Second, I know it's a well worn phrase but if ever there was a time for clear, decisive leadership, this is it. You need it in fairly large buckets. I would come back from meetings and have to inform my colleagues in the group what I had agreed at those meetings, and I had to say to them, look, you back me or you sack me on this.

**is there one thing that stands out for you?**

We made it clear that Berkshire County Council died on a certain Friday, Bracknell Forest Borough Council died at the same time and Bracknell Forest Unitary Authority was born on the following Monday. And we made a real effort to make that the case. Now that is not an easy thing for anybody to do, but we did it and we couldn't have done it as successfully if it was a 'welcome to Bracknell Forest' sort of thing. That would have meant that the Berkshire County Council staff would have felt like second rate employees.

**what kind of mechanisms did you use for asset allocation?**

We established a process for classifying assets into different categories and then agreed how we would divide them. For example, for major assets such as buildings, the Council in whose area it was would take responsibility for the building. If it sold the building within a 25 year period, it would require the permission of all six. Any sale proceeds would be allocated among all six on a sliding scale that reduced from 100% of capital in year one to zero after 25 years. Any major capital that you had spent on the property during your period of ownership would be top sliced off the sale value. It worked well. It was fair and it was seen to be fair.

**what else helped in managing the change?**

As council leaders, we came ready to be decisive. It was no good going to a meeting to discuss how we were going to divvy up prestigious buildings like manor houses and things like that, and having one Leader out of the six saying 'I'm going to have to refer back to my group'. We had to go with a mandate to lead and not to be a spokesman.

## clarity

### minimising uncertainty and maximising momentum

The lead-in time for unitary restructuring is short. This is in contrast to the local government reorganisation in the 1990s when some councils had more than two years to prepare. However, then, the longer timetable sometimes only prolonged the arguments. The relatively short timetable gives councils the advantage of establishing a sense of momentum and moving fast to resolve uncertainty. It also places an extra premium on getting early judgements right.

A strong overall vision will help but councils then need to be clear about the implications of this vision for actual restructuring. In overall terms, there are likely to be two dominant drivers for the process – the vision itself and ‘on the ground’ evidence about what the local area needs and how existing services are shaping up. In combination, these two things should point to where big change needs to happen and where change can be more gradual.

As well as clarity on this ‘landscape of change’, early clarity on the ground rules for the actual process of restructuring will be vital. Who will be leading it? What will be the timetable? What is decided and what is for consultation? What arrangements will be in place for the interim period? Key transitional issues include: Who is taking decisions on transitional matters? What about major decisions by the existing authorities, such as large contracts or asset disposals, that could have a significant impact on the new authority?

Again, these matters may need to be considered against a background of some players maintaining opposition to the restructuring. Constructive engagement in a professional manner with restructuring need not be incompatible with principled opposition. Leaders and senior members should consider how best to use party mechanisms as well as council dialogue. Robust dialogue about key principles, such

as the extent to which accrued balances and assets will remain earmarked for the locality from which they arose, may play an important role in establishing a clear way forward.

Agreeing and establishing a protocol for the transition and restructuring process as early as possible is vital. Many councillors with experience of previous reorganisations report that, once this key step has been taken and clarity is reached on the ground rules, the atmosphere changes and a greater sense of momentum is achieved.

Many people’s jobs – elected members, staff and those in outside bodies – will be affected by restructuring. A clear picture should be communicated to show how the new authority is intended to look, how it will be different and why it will be better. It should make clear if and where major change is going to take place, when, why and how. In some areas, change may be less radical

but, nonetheless, consideration will need to be given to the implications and opportunities that result from the new council and new culture. Outside organisations, for example in the voluntary sector who rely on grant funding from existing councils, should not be overlooked in this process.



1. have you mapped out the 'ground rules' for restructuring covering things like joint implementation teams, asset allocation and major decisions by existing authorities?
2. as well as central government ground rules, are you being pro-active in identifying what you need to put in place in your local area to make a success of the transition?
3. are you clear about where the big 'change programmes' will be needed and where change can be more gradual?
4. is the timetable and process for actual restructuring clear to everyone it affects? have you decided how and when to communicate the change in local authority status to service users and partners? what role will re-branding play in this?



"If only we'd...

...given more focus to having dedicated capacity for key things rather than getting too many people involved in the whole process. Knowing what I now know, I'd have three teams: a 'business as usual' team, to deliver services up to 'go live'; a 'joint implementation team' planning for 'go live'; and a 'closure team' supporting those staff who were exiting from the organisation."

Tudor Evans' first period of leadership of Plymouth City Council began just one month after the formation of the new council following reorganisation in 1998. He emphasises the importance of financial preparation and taking the opportunity for members to get in the driving seat ahead of time.

**what were the main challenges you faced?**

We had a step change in moving from a district to a unitary. You have to make two principle gear changes. First, in terms of financial responsibility and, second, in terms of the breadth of service delivery.

**how can leaders and members best prepare for that?**

I was really pleased that we persuaded some of our old guard to hold an exercise where we role-played the running of a unitary council. It was a three-day event and was really useful in terms of being able to work a few things out before so that we hit the ground running. I think it was particularly helpful for some of the councillors, who weren't right at the top of the apex doing the negotiations, to get a better sense of what we were getting into. The stakes are high so any chance to rehearse and work through issues before you start has got to be taken. Whether you are a district or a county, that kind of exercise is very useful to prepare for the new unitary responsibilities.

**was there anything that surprised you, either at the time or looking back?**

Just how much of a driver for change the authority is capable of being. It's a huge opportunity – it's more than the organisation of council services. In fact, organisation of council services is one of the least important things of what you're going to be doing, because you are going to be responsible for running the show. You are your city or your area. And I know that sounds arrogant but it isn't meant to be. What I mean is that the unitary authority can legitimately be said to be leading their area from the front. It needs to do that, it needs to give direction, it needs to give purpose, it needs to give certainty.

**what advice would you pass on to other leaders?**

Be ready to run the financial ruler over everything, including scrutinising the geographical pattern of spending from the predecessor councils in the run up to restructuring. You need to be sure reallocations are based on sound figures and are not distorted in any way. Also, don't forget the capital programme. Are the schools and highways, for example, in good condition or are they in need of repair? What has been the pattern of investment in the run-up to reorganisation and are there significant unexplained differences with the historical trend?

ensuring transformation as well as a smooth transition

At the end of the day, the new council will be judged by its delivery. Has it lived up to its promises? Does it provide better value for money? Is it delivering more for the locality? Or is it just more of the same, only in a different guise? Those are the questions that the electorate, the local media and local stakeholders will be asking.

Restructuring is sometimes characterised as entailing a dilemma between transformation and transition. The reality is that the tension between the two may be more apparent than real. Most senior local government people, looking back over the reorganisations that they have been through, point to the importance of emphasising and promoting a new approach while safeguarding service continuity.

A transformed vision and culture is often seen as very important in driving new authorities forward. It provides the springboard for change. It also needs to inform

early decisions on structure and, possibly, root and branch reform in cases of clear underperformance. However, the transformation into a unitary authority, while offering an opportunity to tackle underperformance, is not a solution in itself. Some authorities inherited problems in the previous reorganisation which added to the burden of change. In hindsight it would have been better to tackle these problems before the new authority inherited them.

But change and transformation is not simply a 'day one event'. The first days are important because they set the tone and direction but the real transformation is likely to take place in the first years not days. Indeed, many would argue against too much change in one go. Continuity of 'mission critical' systems and services is likely to entail a certain amount of parallel running or phased change.

It is, undoubtedly, important to ensure, as early as possible, that you are building the leadership

capacity and capability to deliver successful change. Members will be presiding over a much wider portfolio of services than was previously the case. It will be important to consider the implications for the range of skills and experience that need to be represented on the council and those which can be developed through appropriate member training and support in the transition year.

Equally vital, early on, is the appointment of a Chief Executive and other key management positions. Swift action here will ensure you are able to offer posts to existing staff you wish to retain, not losing them during a period of uncertainty, as well as attract fresh blood from outside. In this officer recruitment, leaders and councillors will need to focus on the qualities needed to lead the new authority forward. The ability to deliver the vision for the new council will be a key selection factor together with the ability to forge a new culture that eclipses

the legacy 'district' and 'county' cultures. Selection processes need to be careful to ensure that they are not unduly influenced by looking back on the past rather than concentrating on the qualities needed for the future. The same is true, of course, in the selection of portfolio holders.

The staffing issues associated with restructuring, and its impact on senior management in particular, are myriad and complex, for example how to manage the predecessor authorities in the transition period. Many of these issues are different from those of the last re-organisation and specialist knowledge and advice will be needed.



1. are you taking the earliest possible opportunity to appoint your chief officer team who can help you deliver momentum and make the restructuring a reality?
2. are you seizing the opportunity for innovation? if not, how will you ensure that people don't get entrenched after the event, leaving it difficult to move forward?
3. do you have processes in place to ensure you are clear regarding the skills of staff you will inherit? will existing performance and disciplinary issues, which could be costly to inherit, be flagged?
4. are you harnessing the right blend of member experience and talent that you need? will you have the right balance of experience of running previous county and district services? have you given thought to how you might retain valuable member experience that would otherwise be lost to the new council, perhaps through the creation of advisory roles and co-option committee roles? are you taking the opportunity to boost diversity objectives and improve the representativeness of the council to the communities it serves?'



“If only we’d...

...been more single-minded about using the opportunity to make sure we had the very best people for the job on both the member and officer side. Instead, we appointed existing directors into the new unitary posts. The structure we created was okay, and the strategy was good, but some of the appointments were poor. Members hung on to their familiar roles for the wrong reasons and could not perform in the new enhanced roles. We should have at least offered them support in these new roles.”

West Berkshire was one of six unitary councils that were formed when Berkshire County Council and the previous districts were reorganised in 1998. Gerald Vernon Jackson was deputy leader of West Berkshire Council at the time of the reorganisation.

**what would you emphasise most to councillors who are leading restructuring?**

It is vital that there is a seamless transfer. You've got to make sure that people's pay cheques are paid; that people still get home care; that planning applications are handled in the same way; that the swimming pool is open at the right time on day one; that people can phone to get a repairs service or, if it's sheltered accommodation, that the phone line people use for the emergency line works and is answered in the same way. Continuity is vital because, if you mess up, people's lives are affected and you get a reputation for inefficiency from day one.

**how do you make sure that the transfer is seamless?**

It's not rocket science. It's about working really hard through the detail and having good project management. You need to make sure you've got decent officers so that it is done, and done properly. It's about getting the detail right and you've got a very, very short time to get it done. Lots of places want everybody to know the council has changed. People don't give a fig that the council has a different name – all they want is the things that they rely on to happen. So making a big song and dance of it is irrelevant.

**isn't restructuring a golden opportunity to make changes, for example to address underperformance?**

No, I don't think I agree. If you can't manage change in an ordinary circumstance, why on earth are you going to be able to do it better because you've got a massive upheaval? Actually I think it's one of the difficult times to do change, because it's a time of really substantial tension with lots of officers or councillors worried that their job or seat is at risk.

**what about getting the right people?**

Yes, you've got to go and get the right staff and get them fast, to do the preparation work for your new authority. Don't just rely on what you've got, go and find good people. Likewise, with councillors – don't rely on what you've got, go and headhunt good people.

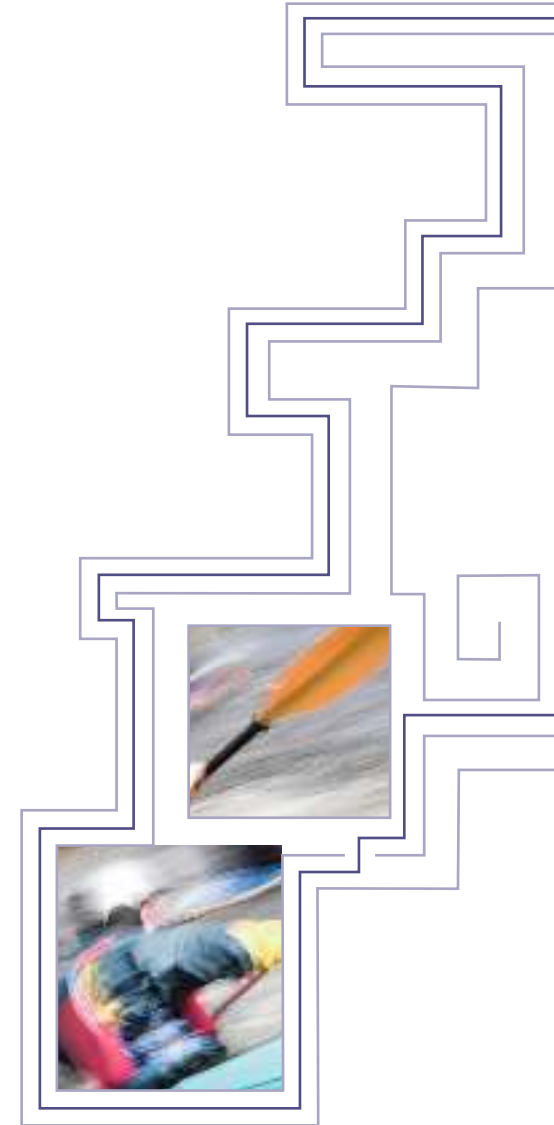
A key expectation of restructuring councils is that they will be able to achieve synergies. These will take the form of direct savings arising from the removal of duplication and the merger, in particular, of back-office functions. They will also stem from the opportunities that arise from the new unitary footprint of the council, enabling scope for more efficient and effective service delivery.

Whether it is back-office savings or wider efficiencies, councils need to be looking beyond their own organisation. Back office services might be more cost-effectively delivered, for example, by a completely different council or provider rather than just a streamlined version of the existing council functions. On the wider service delivery front, the real synergies are not just going to come from local government reorganisation but from looking at local public services as a whole.

Regardless of restructuring, local authorities face a continual quest for efficiencies. Ambitious efficiency gains will be required as part of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review. Leaders of restructuring councils will want to be able to look to financial management information that allows them to distinguish between the savings that result from restructuring and those that flow from ongoing efficiency initiatives.

Councils will face dilemmas. The new unitary councils will be inheriting district footprints of council premises and services. The public will be used to district access and the new councils will have to ensure that financial rationalisation is not achieved at the expense of local service. Nonetheless, there may be opportunities for reform that both improve service delivery and make more efficient use of the property asset base.

The importance of IT presents both a challenge and an opportunity. It is a big potential area for synergies but, with so many parts of the organisation dependent on IT, any changes have to be approached cautiously. A period of parallel running of new and old systems is advisable. Councils are likely to find that they have to invest before they can save. Legacy systems may be inadequate for the new unitary scale and structure. Crucially, councils will want to rethink IT in the light of their role in and strategies for wider public service delivery. Again, this comes back to the need to think through synergies and efficiencies in the context of wider public service delivery and not just the new organisation.





1. how certain are you that the savings in your restructuring proposals will materialise? are you sure that robust 'like with like' mechanisms are in place to allow you to track progress towards and achievement of these targets? have you fully identified the costs of restructuring, including matters such as the possibility of equal pay claims?
2. what policies have you got in place to gain maximum value from expenditure on restructuring itself? are you insisting that proposals for 'one-off' expenditure, for example re-branding, are assessed on a 'lasting value' basis and that the costs are minimised by dovetailing with normal recurrent investment, such as vehicle renewal or buildings refurbishment?
3. are you confident that there is sufficient focus on the 'outcomes' side as well as the 'savings' potential of synergies? have you got a clear view of where you expect restructuring to result in improved service outcomes for the people that the new authority serves and can you point to good measures for tracking progress towards and achievement of these improvements?
4. are you making sure that restructuring is not taking your 'eye off the ball' in terms of wider savings and efficiencies? as well as integrating the councils in the new unitary area, are you also focused on the opportunities for greater synergies that could come from a more strategic approach to public services in your area and, also, teaming up with councils or other organisations outside your area?

"If only we'd...

...been more careful in identifying the potential banana skins. We delivered big time on nearly all the things that matter – achieving our target savings, improving the delivery of key services and making the area a better place to live in – but we tripped over one small grant for a voluntary organisation. It's a bit like those retrospective programmes on the Blair years. Out of all the successful speeches, it's the slow hand-clapping at the Women's Institute that gets shown time and time again. We let one grant slip off our radar screen and it caused so much bad feeling that people remember the stink it caused even now, nine years on."

Halton BC was one of four unitary councils established in the North West in 1998. Formerly part of Cheshire County Council, Halton covers the industrial areas of Runcorn and Widnes on the River Mersey. Council leader Tony McDermott emphasises the importance of being far-sighted and ambitious about the potential of a new unitary council.

**what was the heart of your vision?**

We played to the strengths and needs of our area. We are an industrial area and that is quite different from the mainstream of Cheshire. We had a relatively deprived area and regeneration was a priority that wasn't getting proper attention in the old set up. Becoming a unitary has enabled us to focus on where our best interests lie, both regionally with Merseyside and on a wider stage. Our interests are now well represented, we've been successful in attracting inward investment and we've transformed huge areas of brownfield land on the banks of the Mersey.

**what practical developments has it led to?**

The Widnes Waterfront is bringing 2,700 new jobs into the area, the Daresbury Laboratory is one of the leading scientific research centres and we're now promoting one of the biggest highway projects in the history of local government – the £390 million new Mersey Gateway bridge. I can't imagine these happening the way they have if we had still to convince the county that they ought to be a priority. Restructuring also benefited our council tax payers. Central government grant had not been finding its way proportionately to Halton. When the grant became disaggregated there was an increase in funding. Our council tax is lower than any other part of Cheshire, apart from Warrington, and is the third lowest in the North West.

**what tips would you pass on to others?**

Be brave and bold. Don't be beguiled into entering into lots of joint arrangements with the council or the area you have just departed from. That will just keep ticking over what happened in the past. It is important to still have some ties, of course, but be clear about where your future strategy lies. Looking back, we were perhaps too tentative for a while. We could have started earlier to disentangle some of the remaining links that were part of the two tier system.

**is there one thing that stands out for you in making a success of restructuring?**

We were very careful to make sure that our essential services were delivered safely but keeping the management and staffing structure to a minimum proved to be one of the most important decisions that we took. I couldn't stress that too much. It's much easier to grow staff if you need to and if it's affordable than, later on, to have to go through a downsizing exercise.

The IDeA will develop and deliver with the LGA, LGE, and other partners, a programme to support Local Authorities during the process of unitary restructuring.

The programme will seek to work with those authorities affected by unitary re-organisation in order to:

- bring those at affected authorities together to share experiences and learning, and offer mutual support
- help authorities to identify and collate examples of good practice to share across all affected authorities
- broker agreements where necessary and provide advice, as specified in the CLG consultation paper 'Councils proposals for Unitary Local Government – An approach to implementation'.

This support is likely to consist of:

- workshops, seminars and action learning
- online resources and communities of practice to allow the sharing of challenges and solutions
- leadership support to individual councils and groups of councils from accredited peers
- establishing links to relevant IDeA national programmes, such as strategic housing, healthy communities and planning advisory service, in order to support the shaping of new services and more collaborative approaches.

The IDeA would be grateful for your input into developing the programme. Our aim is to provide the support you need and to ensure that efficiencies are gained through sharing.

If you have any queries or would like to contribute to this development please contact one of the team.

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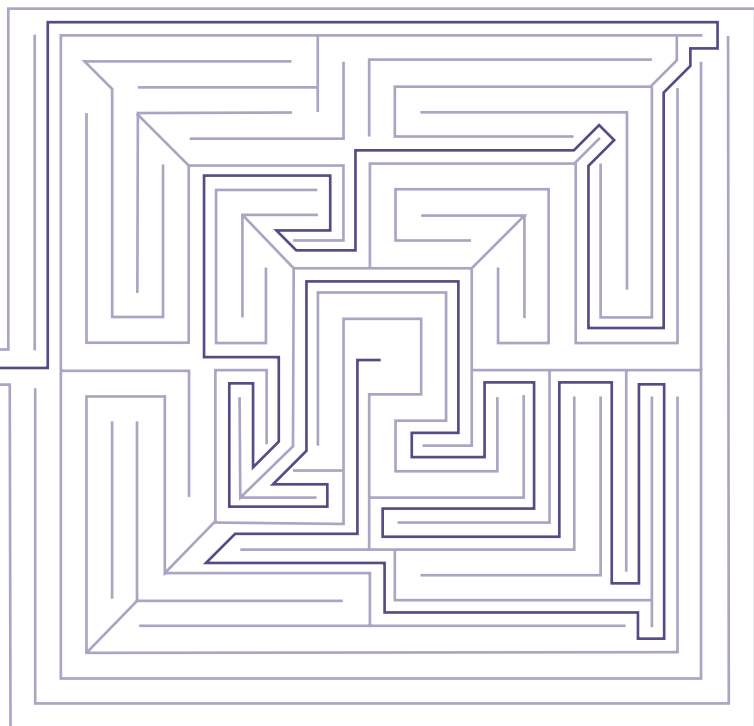
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