

District Councils' Proposals for Modernising Local Government in Buckinghamshire: Implications for BMKFA

Background

On 27 September 2016 Buckinghamshire County Council (BCC) submitted a proposal to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government for the abolition of the existing two tier structure of county and district councils and its replacement by a single unitary council to cover the whole of the existing area administered by BCC. An initial assessment of the potential implications of this for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority (BMKFA) was presented to Members for consideration at the Fire Authority meeting on 19 October 2016.

In May 2016 BCC's leader invited the four district councils to work with BCC to explore potential options for local government reorganisation including ones based on a district level unitary model. However, the district councils declined the invitation to take part in this and instead commissioned Deloitte to undertake a separate study on their behalf. At the time when officers were preparing their initial assessment of the potential implications of BCC's proposal for BMKFA, the Deloitte study was pending publication so it was not possible to include consideration of it, or any proposals arising out of it, within the scope of that assessment.

On 10 January 2017, the district councils published proposals, informed by the strategic options analysis undertaken by Deloitte and the outcome of a stakeholder engagement exercise, for the creation of two new unitary councils to replace the existing county and four districts structure. The proposals were considered simultaneously by all four district councils at special meetings convened for this purpose on 16 January 2017 with a view to agreeing their submission to the Secretary of State which they did.

The two new unitary areas proposed by the district councils comprise the creation of a 'North Unitary' in the area currently covered by Aylesbury Vale District Council and a 'South Unitary' which would combine the areas presently covered by Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe District Councils. Each unitary would consolidate and deliver services currently provided by the County and Districts within each of the two new council areas.

Basis of evaluation

The scope of this initial assessment is confined to identifying potential areas of risk and opportunity for BMKFA relative to the existing two tier local government structure. It does not therefore seek to compare the merits in general terms of the competing BCC and District Councils' proposals or seek to determine whether one offers superior stakeholder value over the other as this would be beyond the remit and competencies of the Authority. However, some comparisons will be drawn to illustrate the comparative effects on BMKFA's operations in so far as they can be determined or inferred from the proposals.

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Implications for BMKFA

As with the BCC proposal, neither the Deloitte Strategic Options Case nor the District Councils' proposals identify any specific implications for the organisation or delivery of fire and rescue services within the county. Given that the scope of BMKFA operations already covers the whole of the area comprised by the proposed two unitary structure it is not envisaged that their creation would, of itself, require any fundamental change to the existing organisational and service delivery arrangements for fire and rescue services which could be accommodated by BMKFA in much its present form. However, there would be some changes to the composition and balance of the Authority's membership to reflect nominations from three more equally balanced bodies rather than the current two constituent councils (BCC and Milton Keynes Council). This would require the Secretary of State to repeal the Buckinghamshire Fire Services (Combination Scheme) Order 1996 and replace it with a new combination scheme.

Potential Benefits and Opportunities for BMKFA

Regardless of which proposal is favoured by the Secretary of State, we are of the view that the materials presented by the District Councils in support of their case set out and articulate very well the strategic context and challenges facing all public authorities serving Buckinghamshire. The range of economic, socio-demographic and 'good practice' information presented will also be of use in informing our own service planning and improvement processes.

We see the logic and potential benefits of reorganising local government on the basis of economic geography rather than historical political boundaries. This could benefit the local economy as a whole if it helps to catalyse a marginal increase in inward investment and business growth relative to the status quo potentially growing and improving the resilience of the local tax base at a time of anticipated further reductions to central government funding. However, we note that the proposed re-organisation of itself will not be sufficient either to meet the strategic challenges identified or to put local government finances in Buckinghamshire as a whole onto a sustainable basis for the future and achieving this will also depend on the success of other measures to transform service delivery and stimulate the local economy.

We also note the emphasis in the vision for the proposed new councils on improving community resilience through early intervention to promote the independence and capabilities of individuals. This aligns well with BMKFA's own approach in areas such as youth engagement (see figure 1) and there is therefore potential to build on these through enhanced collaboration.

As with the BCC proposal for a single unitary council, the reduction in the number of local council organisations would potentially provide:

- A simpler, clearer context for BMKFA to undertake its own planning;
- Opportunities for the streamlining of data sharing agreements;

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- Simplification of local resilience arrangements via a reduction in number of 'category one' organisations;
- New premises opportunities from rationalisation of existing premises which could include new sites and opportunities to co-locate BMKFA functions with related functions in the new unitary council structures;
- New opportunities for sharing support systems and functions.

However, the extent of these may be less than could be the case with a move to a single unitary council organisation.

Under the BCC proposal our initial evaluation identified potential benefits arising from harmonisation of approaches to policy and decision making in areas such as licensing, planning, building control and regulation, and environmental health. A reduction in the number of authorities dealing with these areas to two (or three when Milton Keynes is taken into account) is likely to yield some benefits in terms of simplifying our operating environment though we anticipate that this would be less than would be the case with a move to single unitary authority for the areas currently served by the four district councils.

Potential Risks and Issues

As with the BCC proposal we are of the view that the greatest risks are likely to arise during the transition from the current state to the point where a new structure is fully integrated and established.

We note the District Councils' indicative implementation plan and view that the transition to a two unitary structure could be achieved to the same timescale envisaged by BCC for implementation of a single unitary structure.

Irrespective of whether or not the end state envisaged by the District Councils offers superior stakeholder value compared with the single unitary option proposed by BCC, an exercise which involves combining three existing district councils and dividing the services and functions currently delivered by BCC between two new council entities would seem to us to be a more challenging and risky enterprise compared with drawing the functions of the existing district councils up into a single unitary arrangement based on the existing County Council organisation and infrastructure when the relative sizes of the current organisations is considered.

This may accentuate some of risks that were identified as being associated with the transition to a single unitary structure such as:

- Potential disruption to service delivery as structures and processes are rationalised; and / or,
- Potential loss of key personnel leading to loss of contacts, expertise or local knowledge with the potential for adverse impacts on partner organisations.

However, the task of reconfiguring the Authority's service delivery structures and processes may be simpler than would be the case with the 19 local,

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multi-agency, community hub / board structure envisaged under the BCC proposal.

Finally there is a risk that our strategic planning context becomes more complex with, when Milton Keynes is included, a move to three strategic planning authorities compared with the current two. Alongside this, the move to a geo-economic approach to strategic planning for transportation and infrastructure development, whilst potentially beneficial in other respects, may lead, in the long run, to a neglect of north-south connectivity which already disadvantages the Authority by requiring it to maintain separate strategic service delivery capacity in the north (Milton Keynes), centre (Aylesbury) and south (High Wycombe) of the area that we serve to offset slow travel times across what in other respects is a relatively small geographical area.

Overall Assessment

Overall our view is that the greatest risks to BMKFA operations arises during the transition from the current state to the new two unitary structure. On balance we are of the view that a move to a two unitary council structure is likely to be a more complex and therefore risky enterprise from the point of view of maintaining service continuity than would be the case with a move to a single unitary arrangement based on the existing BCC organisation and infrastructure. Also there is less detail on the mechanisms that would be created and used to engage and collaborate with key stakeholders throughout the transition. However this is not to say that the end state reached would necessarily be inferior to a single unitary structure either in general terms or for BMKFA as a partner organisation. We are also of the view that, subject to the success of the follow on transformation programme, the proposal has the potential to deliver a more sustainable basis for the provision of local government services in relation to future strategic challenges than the current two tier county / district council structure.