

Report for:	Shadow Executive
Meeting Date:	10 March 2020

Title of Report:	Buckinghamshire Unitary Council Programme Update
Shadow Portfolio Holder	Councillor Martin Tett
Responsible Officer	Rachael Shimmin, Interim Head of Paid Service, Chief Executive Buckinghamshire Council, Chief Executive Buckinghamshire County Council
Report Author Officer Contact:	Roger Goodes, Programme Manager 01296 674486; rgoodes@buckscc.gov.uk
Recommendations:	That the update is noted
Corporate Implications:	n/a
Options: (If any)	n/a
Reason:	This report provides an update on the progress made with the programme to establish the new unitary council for Buckinghamshire.

Introduction

1. This report provides an update on the progress made with the programme to establish the new unitary council for Buckinghamshire.

Overview

2. Last month saw a major milestone in the programme when the Shadow Authority met to consider the budget and constitution for the new council. Both of these documents were agreed.
3. The Shadow Executive had previously agreed these when it met on 18 February. In agreeing the budget the Shadow Executive considered the feedback from the Overview and Scrutiny meetings held in January when they reviewed the proposed budget.
4. The Shadow Executive have also confirmed their support for the funding for Voluntary and Community Groups that the five existing councils had agreed for the next two years, recognising the important role played by these groups in helping the residents of Buckinghamshire. Other policies agreed by the Shadow Executive include a

number which provide support for residents and businesses with council tax and business rates, a revised approach to housing enforcement to protect vulnerable tenants and for the provision of housing adaptation grants and strategies on providing support for learning disabilities and mental health.

5. With just over 3 weeks to go to the launch of the new council, the Unitary programme remains on track to deliver the critical changes required for a smooth transition into the new council. In these final weeks the focus of the programme has turned to the many practical things that need to be in place for 1 April, ensuring there is clarity where changes are being introduced and reassurance where things remain unchanged.

Members

6. At the Shadow Authority on 27 February, Members agreed the budget and new constitution for the new council. This was a major milestone in the creation of Buckinghamshire Council. The meeting also agreed council tax levels, fees and charges, member allowances and the calendar of meetings for the new council.
7. At the Shadow Executive meeting held on 28 January, a number of decisions were made which focussed on how the new council will help its vulnerable residents. These included how Discretionary Housing Payments would be allocated, support for residents on War Disablement and War Widows' Pensions and support with Business Rates.
8. At the same meeting, members approved a new policy for housing enforcement which looks at the enforcement of private sector housing standards and licensing of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) together with associated fees. They also approved a common housing grant (Housing Improvement and Adaptations) policy to ensure that wherever applicants live, there is parity in terms of the available grant assistance, and assistance is targeted to maximise preventative actions.
9. Members also agreed new strategies on providing support for residents with learning disabilities and those affected by mental health problems. Both identified the importance of working together with our partners to address need, build resilience within the community and ensure people can access the right support when needed.
10. At the meeting of the Shadow Executive on 18 February, members considered two of the significant milestones within the programme to create the new council: the new council's budget and constitution. At the meeting they received the feedback from Overview and Scrutiny following their review of the budget held in January. The final budget agreed by the Executive included a number of the changes proposed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Members of the Shadow Executive also thanked the members of Scrutiny for the thoroughness of this review and the value this has added to the final budget proposal.
11. Members also considered the final draft of the constitution which will form the basis of governance for the new council. This has been developed from the existing council constitutions together with current best practice for a modern unitary council. It also reflects a significant amount of work from both members and officers which the Shadow Executive recognised when considering the final draft. This also went forward to the Shadow Authority meeting.

12. At the same Shadow Executive meeting members recognised the important work of the voluntary and community sector and, as seen in the strategies referred to above, how collaborative working is critical given one organisation cannot solve complex problems alone.
13. Members confirmed their support for the continuation of the predecessor councils' multi-year funding arrangements. They also agreed that a review of these arrangements should be undertaken during this period to review how the funding is distributed across the county.
14. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee also met in February and reviewed the progress of the unitary programme together with the work of the scrutiny task and finish groups.

Organisational Structure

15. Following the appointment of the Service Directors in December, there has been a considerable amount of work undertaken to align staff of the existing councils to the new services. As a result of this work, all staff members have now received confirmation of the Service Director to whom they will report.
16. Following this, Service Directors are hosting meetings for their staff to meet them and understand more about the priorities for their service over the coming months.
17. Ian Thompson, the Corporate Director for Planning Growth and Sustainability, started on 25 January. Ian was the last director appointed to the new council to start.

Progress

18. With just over 3 weeks left until the new council is launched, progress on the unitary programme continues to proceed well without any significant issues or concerns. In no small part this is down to the continued hard work of the many hundreds of staff from across the five councils working on the programme, as well as the support from members and partners.
 19. Of the 115 critical deliverables or 'must haves' identified across the programme, at the end of February we have completed 45. There are 44 'must haves' due to be delivered in March, including 7 which have been delayed from February. In addition 26 'must haves' are scheduled for delivery after 1 April, which in part reflects the date of the election.
 20. Overall there are just 12 of the remaining 70 'must haves', which are to be delivered, rated as Amber. However, all have mitigating actions and therefore remain on track to be delivered.
 21. The programme risk register also reflects the status of the programme with no new risks identified and a number of the existing ones removed as we approach 1 April.
 22. The focus of the programme is now on reviewing the practical arrangements for day 1 and identifying any risks to the smooth transition from the old councils to the new. A number of Service Directors are running 'day 1' workshops with their teams to identify and iron out any of these risks and all Directors are producing service plans. These
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will map out the operational arrangements for their service areas from day 1, and in particular details of how the changes will affect current ways of working.

23. One of the critical areas for a successful launch of the new council is the 17 new Council Access Points. We have therefore asked our critical friend Ameo to carry out a review of our preparedness for 1 April. They have worked through a number of customer scenarios, talking to a range of staff and reviewing documentation and training plans. This review has not highlighted any major issues and subject to the training plans being delivered together with the other support arrangements we are putting in place, they found no fundamental problems with any one of the scenarios.
24. They also remarked from the conversations with staff that there is a very positive attitude about the launch of the new council and a can do attitude about making the experience as positive as possible for customers.
25. We are also working on a day 1 'response' plan so if there are issues in the early days of the new council we are able to deal with these immediately. This will include key staff 'floor walking' within all of the council office locations to deal with issues, in addition to telephone help desks and senior officers physically present in each location.

Communications

26. The external campaign running up to April to raise awareness of the new council has begun, using this theme:



27. Our new social media accounts are now live, posting updates including the first of a series of videos to reassure residents about continuity of services. Posters and adverts will start to appear from next week across the new council area and leaflets will be sent out in March to every household with council tax bills and to businesses through the business rates mailout. Articles are planned in the current councils' resident communications, as well as community magazines, and resources are being provided to town and parish councils and other partners to help spread the word.
28. The last of the current round of staff roadshows took place on 26 February, and throughout March we are running a series of drop in sessions across the council office locations where staff can get answers to any queries they have and to find out about support and training.

29. A new intranet is being developed to go live by day 1 for members and staff, which will provide key information for example on HR and finance policies.

Summary/Conclusions

30. We continue to remain confident that we are on track for April.

31. The hard work of staff and the support of members has ensured we are in a strong position and the assurance from our critical friend has provided additional reassurance that the plans we have put in place will ensure we launch the new council successfully on 1 April 2020.

Background Papers	None
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