



Workforce Solutions for a Changing Landscape

Preparing for Local Government's Future

Interview by Sam Goody, Associate Director - Commercial Services, Opus People Solutions

Alison Golding Assistant Director Workforce & Transformation

Alison has led the HR Service at West Northamptonshire Council since April 2021 and has extensive experience of HR, Management and Transformation roles within Local Government, Health and Higher Education. Under her remit she has HR Business Partnering Transformation, Payroll Services, Learning and Development, Recruitment and Health Safety and Wellbeing.

In December 2024 the government released the devolution whitepaper outlining proposed plans to widen and deepen devolution across England and give local councils greater control by transferring powers and funding from national to local government.

This process will involve Local Government Reorganisation and a move from two tier authorities to combined unitary authorities.

In this article Associate Director Sam Goody spoke to Alison Golding,

Assistant Director of Workforce and Transformation at West Northamptonshire Council about her experience managing her workforce through one of the UK's largest Unitary transformations and the experience, advice and lessons learned that can support future councils undergoing a similar process.

Looking at the opportunities, the risks and the key focuses, both leading up to vesting day as well as the future of the new organisation in the coming years. ▶

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West
Northamptonshire
Council



Background

In 2018 proposals were submitted to government for two unitary authorities.

Northamptonshire County Council and its seven district and borough councils were to be replaced by two unitary authorities, West and North Northamptonshire.

West Northamptonshire unitary authority would cover approximately 402,000 people and North Northamptonshire would serve about 343,000 people.

The two new unitary authorities were established in April 2021, with West Northamptonshire employing over 2700 staff at the time.

Clearly a huge undertaking, but also with the added challenge of being in the midst of a pandemic.

This was during a period of turbulence in the then Northamptonshire County Council, having declared serious financial difficulties in 2018, with government appointed commissioners brought in.

In addition, the decision was also taken that the Children's Service would go out into a Children's Trust, which was created in the middle of this process, going live in the April 2020.

The challenge of course was to bring all these organisations together, aligning processes, procedures and policy and much more whilst at the same time trying to build a new culture and employer brand for the workforce.



Introduction

Hello Alison, many thanks for joining me today.

The words on everyone's lips within local government at the moment are of course around the ongoing conversations regarding Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution. We now know that our region will be heavily affected as the first tranche of priority councils has been announced by central government.

Currently the conversations are very much at a political level, which is understandable, but very quickly these conversations will move at pace to be operational.

Today I want to focus on the operational impact of Local Government Reform and ask about your experience of leading an organisation through this process once the direction of travel has been agreed.

SG: What were the immediate considerations from a workforce perspective when starting the process of reorganisation?

AG: There are several considerations that should come first when starting the process of reorganisation from a workforce perspective. Firstly, you want and need to retain skills and experience through the change and clear communication and engagement will be key in this to bring colleagues on the journey, convince them the change is necessary and critical and ensure there's an understanding of what is happening and why.

It's important to share key messages and ensure these are consistent throughout the transformation process.

It's also vital that the senior leadership team from all councils involved are on board with this and champion these messages. If it's clear that some senior leaders don't buy into the messaging this can really impact the value of the messages.

A large part of forming this messaging will also involve understanding the pre re-organisation readiness for change - how are staff feeling, what are their questions and what are the local factors that may be playing in here? In Northamptonshire, we could see the differences between

the readiness of the County Council staff, for whom change was a constant, compared to the District and Borough Council staff who were used to stability.

The other immediate consideration is early Trade Union engagement.

You will need to start early with union discussions on pay, terms and conditions and HR policies and procedures as all of these need to be developed for the new employer. You'll also need to think early on about the kind of employer you want to be and what your relationships with key stakeholders like the unions look like.

SG: What advice would you give leaders on how to support staff through any potential disaggregation?

AG: Bring transparency and openness to internal discussions and in your communications. It's a huge change, and it's not going to be easy, both in the run up to vesting day and beyond but being transparent about the challenges, and the communication on what you are doing to work through them will help and prepare colleagues.

At Northamptonshire we took a very deliberate approach to be clear and transparent with both the bad news and the good news to avoid any mistrust or hostility that can arise from not being transparent. ▶

**THINK EARLY
ON ABOUT
THE KIND OF
EMPLOYER
YOU WANT
TO BE**





► However, the challenges are also exciting. For those employees who enjoy problem solving, unpicking the knotty problems, for having ability to shape your future, this can be an exciting time. By exciting and energising these people about the positive changes that can happen they can influence others in the organisation to be on the journey.

You also have to be clear and swift with your decision making. Vesting day cannot change and there are so many dependencies and inter dependencies. Those working on delivering reorganisation rely on you to bring clarity of thought, and decision making on options presented. You will need to balance wanting to think through the options, with bringing a clear decision so work can continue.

Do as much thinking up front, ensure you are talking from a point of knowledge and understanding. Get into the detail, know your contracts, know the staffing makeup, the key milestones of the programme delivery plan, the broad remit of the services that are under the change and the different staffing groups.

Think about putting in place a network of change ambassadors - they can drive the messaging for you, communication in and out of the workforce. Give them early insight and information sharing

SG: Alison, you have said to me previously that it is important to not just focus on Vesting Day as this is actually the beginning of the transformation, rather than the end. So as an organisation you have made it to Vesting Day - What were the "Day one" challenges?

AG: This is the big one for me as getting to vesting day was just the tip of the iceberg.

Don't underestimate the seismic shift that has taken place. The first few months in HR we were firefighting, 'have we got x', 'how do we do y' plus we were embedding a new team comprising of people from four different organisations.

Day one – we were like a start up, no employer brand, no employer presence.

We had no recruitment system for example, different ways of

doing recruitment, from wholly self service in the county to a hand holding do everything on a spreadsheet in another council.

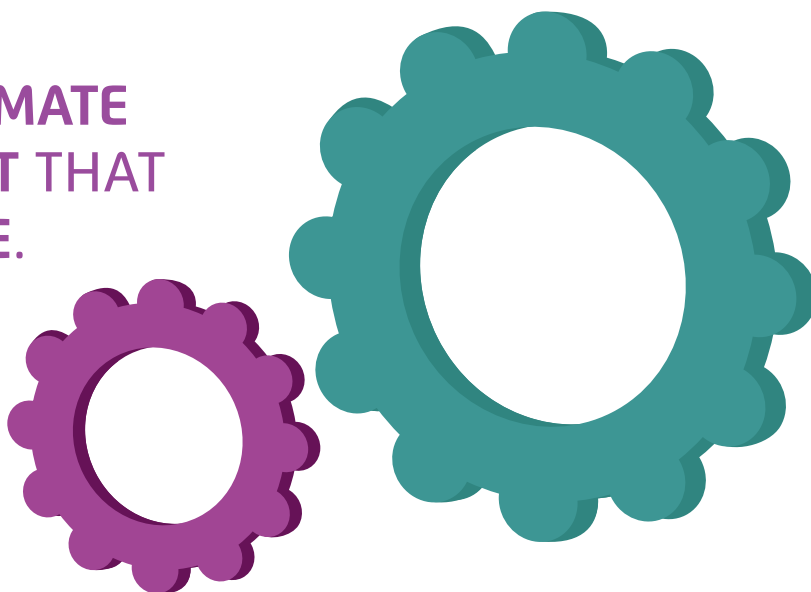
There was a myriad of organisational cultures and sub cultures – 'how things are done around here' varied from team to team.

However, we did have a set of organisational values, THRIVE (trust, high performance, respect, innovate, value empower) – these were formed pre transfer and really helped us to quickly start to set the new culture.

Pay, terms and conditions were huge for us – day one we had no West Northants pay structure. We only had a partial set of new terms and conditions that had been negotiated with the unions. We needed to quickly put in place interim pay arrangements to cope with new starters.

Then we had to think about how we constructed a pay structure. We undertook pay modelling and starting evaluating all of the jobs within the organisation. ►

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Trust, High Performing, Respect, Innovate, Value, Empower

THRIVE was a big conversation and at the centre of everything we did – engaging the workforce on the desired culture. A thread running through the candidate journey, from campaigns through application and to induction and learning and development.

Embedding and reinforcing the culture and our new values at every opportunity was important. Ensure the messaging was consistent and regular and that it continues to this day.

We did things like Introducing an employee recognition awards event called the THRIVE awards.

We Introduced our employee pulse surveys and we set our ways of working with our worker types and created a managers and employees behaviours framework.

All of the above was underpinned by new policies, across organisation manager training and reinforcement from senior leadership.



West Northamptonshire Council

► SG: You mentioned cultures and sub cultures, How did you redefine and embed your new culture into the new organisation?

AG: Be clear across the workforce, this is us, this is what is important and this is our vision.

We undertook the best companies' employee survey in October 2021 and this gave us a baseline to understand the inherited culture. Some staff were sitting

on the fence regarding the new organisation. Some were excited, expecting immediate transformation, but uncertain as to leadership, vision, purpose.

We wrote and launched our first people strategy, there were 65 plus HR projects under that strategy.

We created six core values, forming the acronym THRIVE. ■

BE CLEAR ACROSS THE WORKFORCE, THIS IS US, THIS WHAT IS IMPORTANT AND THIS IS OUR VISION



As Northamptonshire County Council's temporary recruitment partner since 2017, Opus was the chosen provider to support the streamlining of recruitment processes from the seven councils and bring the temporary workforce under one arrangement, successfully implementing with the new West and North Northamptonshire unitaries to ensure the councils had not just the required resource for the transformation but also to support their needs moving forwards.

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