

The New Unitary and Strategic Authority Leader

Prospectus 2026



Do we need new practices?

Creating new unitary and strategic authorities presents significant transformational opportunities, but they also risk conflict, delay and the loss of key capabilities and people. By learning and learning from the past, in this round how can we-

For the public

- Ensure the minimum disruption and the maximum benefit in the shortest time?
- Continue the process of public service reform whilst the new organisations take shape?

For organisations

- Create new unitaries that begin in a positive way, with everyone committed to a new future?
- Create strategic authorities that are engaged with communities and partners and have meaningful workplans?
- Avoid a set of dynamics based on winners and losers and a perception of 'take over' and build a positive culture from the start?

For staff members

- Minimise uncertainty and maintain their sense of agency?
- Value their previous endeavours and understand their relevance to the challenges of the new authorities?
- Create an even, meritocratic playing field for attaining jobs in the new councils?

Trends in the world of mergers and acquisitions (M&A) provide illuminating insights and fresh practices. In recent decades they have seen a shift:

- **Away** from a **sequential** process; with a one after another appointment of leaders at different levels, a focus on structures, valuations and governance
- **Toward** one more focused on a **parallel** process of pre-merger activity, asset identification, leadership development, relationship building and cultural development, resulting in the swift realisation of benefits from day 1

Finding a better way to create new authorities

To continually improve practices, can we bring into awareness the assumptions we make so that we don't act from a kind of 'muscle memory' that shapes activities without question. How can we move from a sequential to a parallel approach without compromising the future authorities?

Historic tendency

Emerging best practices

The decision has to be made before work can begin, otherwise the work is wasted

- The broad challenges that new unitary councils and mayoral strategic authorities face are known and prepared for in advance
- Understanding what assets and capabilities individual organisations bring to these known challenges can help accelerate future decision making
- Councils working together in advance of the decision to build relationships and trust with a focus on the future

Senior leaders must be in place in order to determine approaches to challenges, and their hands must not be tied

- Preparing the evidence base, consulting with communities and partners, researching what works, can help inform decision making for leaders once appointed, and keep communities engaged throughout

We can make a fresh start/blank piece of paper, "out with the old and in with the new"

- Whilst fresh impetus is created from the new organisations coming into being many of the issues are based in place and culture.
- 95% of people working for the new organisation will have worked for the old ones, for them this is a transition process and they need to become committed to the new organisations,
- Previous work to be recognised and valued for the contribution it can make to the new authorities.

The Proposal

- Work with a group of like-minded councils who will come together in the interests of the whole place, taking a different approach to the creation of the new authorities with leadership development as the driving force
- Bring together a group of middle leaders across these councils
- Design and deliver an **applied leadership development programme** so they are equipped with the knowledge, skills, relationships and resilience to be able to lead in new authorities
- Set them to work to prepare the ground:
 - Focus them on the likely challenge areas for the new councils
 - Help them develop insight from data and evidence
 - Enable them to engage with partner organisations
 - Give them the opportunity to share and understand the capabilities, networks and relationships that will be of use in the new authorities
 - Give them the opportunity to hear from subject matter experts who have been on the journey they are about to start
 - Enable them to experiment, design and deliver projects the outcomes of which can be used in forming the new authorities
 - Help them to attain the role in the new authority that they can stretch to fulfil
 - Help them to lead others through change

Competency development – leading in the new environment

The programme aims to develop the competency of individuals to flourish in the new environment. These competencies will be co-developed with participating authorities, those below serve as an illustration

Situational leadership

Understanding the unitary and strategic authority landscape
Different leadership styles and the contribution they make to change
Leading technical and adaptive change
Adjusting your leadership style to meet new challenges

Systems leadership

Understanding the systemic context in which new authorities will operate
Being able to lead complex adaptive systems
Understanding the dynamics of systems
Understanding leverage points and the different ways to intervene in systems

Transformation leadership

Able to conceive, design and implement transformational change initiatives
Understanding the opportunities and challenges created by the new authorities
Ability to contribute to major policy agendas such as public service reform

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Resilience and proactivity

Continued service delivery through organisational change
How transformation and disruption impacts on you
Being able to work in complexity and ambiguity
Having a sense of agency and an ability to create agency in others

Applied Leadership Development Programme

The content of the programme is based on the Leadership Centre's experience of designing and delivering learning opportunities to help organisations create new capabilities. A series of leadership summits punctuate the delivery of a number of projects that aim to maximise the benefits of bringing the organisations together. The summits give the opportunity for relevant ideas to be shared and applied and to develop the competency of the participants.

Programme (indicative example)

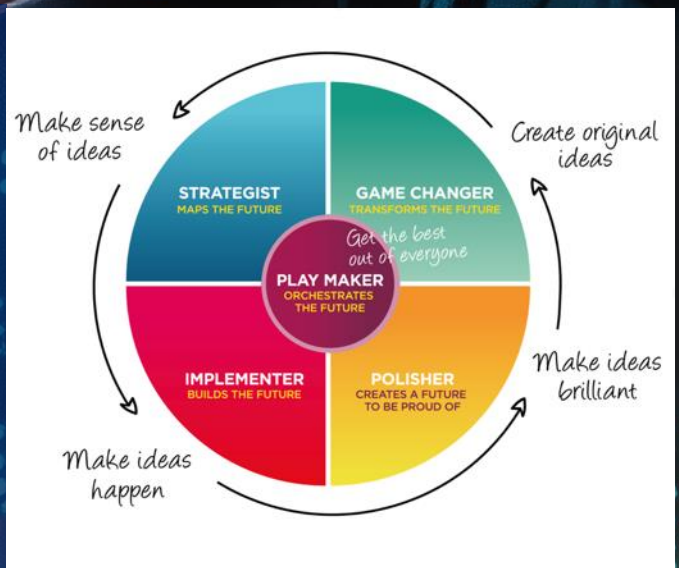
Competencies	Summit 1 Facing the future	Summit 2 Scoping and Planning	Summit 3 Into action	Summit 4 Reflect and iterate	Outcomes
Situational leadership	Getting to safe and legal Challenges and opportunities in Unitary and CCA contexts	The Unitary canvass The value stack approach	Culture and Immunity to change Coalition-building across councils	Orientation toward LGR and MSA	Able to apply different leadership styles
Systems leadership	Engagement approaches Authentic leadership and inclusivity	Combining services in the new unitary and SA environment	Understanding system dynamics Driving change in the systems	Understanding system feedback and planning future interventions	Able to see, understand and lead in systems
Transformation leadership	Working with data and evidence Behaviour change and demand analysis	Technical and adaptive change Delivering better outcomes	Reeves strategy matrix Creating a narrative, the hero and the journey	Action planning for better outcomes in the new authorities	Able to design transformational change
Resilience and proactivity	Opportunities and threats Self-awareness and impact	Leading your team through the transition	Working with GCI styles – core competency framework Team engagement	Personal and team development plan	Able to develop self and others through change

Project teams meetings and work plans

Project work	Project design brief Test learn and grow principles Mentor introduction	Project plans Team formation Scoping Project plan	Project work	Project close Capture learning Plan next steps	New authority contribution

Personal development - self awareness, flexibility, leadership and resilience during change

Local Government reorganisation and devolution create environments that are more uncertain, complex and unpredictable than single organisation leadership. Leaders need to understand their proclivities during this period to become effective at managing themselves and leading others.



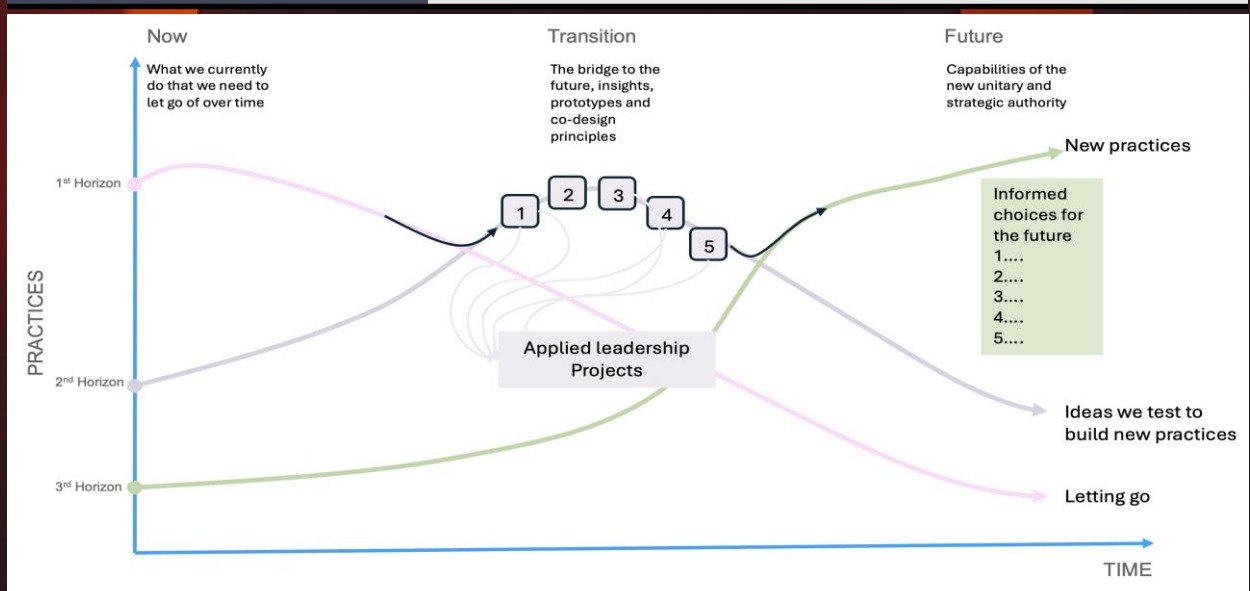
Each participant will receive

- 1:1 coaching based on a Game Changer Index® assessment
 - Five ways in which people contribute to transformation.
- The opportunity to collaborate with equivalents in other councils on projects that explore and prepare for the new unitary and strategic authority landscape
 - That specifically aim to promote (not protect) district capabilities, networks and relationships through a series of experiments/prototypes
- Career coaching advice, so that they can
 - Determine their ambition in terms of their role and goals in the new authorities
 - Lead their teams effectively through change
 - Build their portfolio of experience and achievement
 - Refresh their CV and develop the confidence to move forward

Developing the new organisations

The programme will support the delivery of a number of projects/experiments that ensure practical benefit and learning for participants as well. Whilst submissions will differ there will often be commonality about the challenges and tasks. The programme works to identify current capabilities and to combine and build on them so that they are the building blocks of the future

Challenge	Examples of common purpose in competing bids
Economy	Shared focus on regional productivity and sectoral strengths
Population and wellbeing	Shared concern to be addressed through integrated planning across housing, health, and education, emphasis on prevention
Infrastructure & Housing	Combination emphasises strategic integration and local implementation
Environment & Climate	Both stress nature recovery and climate action
Skills & Employment	Strong consensus on tackling skills gaps linked to growth
Digital & Innovation	Promotes digital transformation and applied technology in services.
Finance & Sustainability	Both highlight fiscal resilience and efficiency through simplification.
Community & Identity	Shared commitment to local empowerment, combination of policy-led and community narrative-led.
Partnerships & Delivery	Both value partnerships; operational and structural integration.



Value Stacks

Important benefits of LGR are the efficiency gains that can come from scale, standardisation and simplification.

The larger and longer-term prize however comes from the bringing together of former district and upper tier assets to drive prevention, growth, net zero and digital agendas. In a process known as 'value stacking' the capabilities required of the new organisation are considered and then the assets, relationships, data, services and infrastructure of each merging organisations are identified. It is the potential of these combinations that we can start to explore in the project work... Examples are given below:

The Prevention Stack

District assets:

Housing options & homelessness
Private sector housing enforcement
Environmental health
Community relationships

- ✓ Poor housing as a contributory health issue
- ✓ Homelessness prevention
- ✓ Reduced social care demand
 - ✓ Fewer housing-related hospital admissions
- ✓ Left shift in health care continuum toward prevention

Unitary/SA assets

Adult social care
Public health
Market shaping and commissioning responsibility

The Growth Stack

District assets:

Economic development
Town centre management
Business support
Tourism & place marketing

- ✓ Matching growth sectors to skills development to drive local employability
- ✓ Creating a growth narrative for the whole area
- ✓ Targeting devolution investment funds for whole area benefit

Unitary/SA assets

Adult education & skills
Transport & connectivity
Strategic employer engagement
Links to SA's and devolution funding

Value Stacks

Important benefits of LGR are the efficiency gains that can come from scale, standardisation and simplification.

The larger and longer-term prize however comes from the bringing together of former district and upper tier to drive public service reform, growth, skills and other agendas. In a process known as 'value stacking' the capabilities required of the new organisation are considered and then the assets, relationships, data, services and infrastructure of each merging organisations are identified. It is the potential of these combinations that we can start to explore in the project work... Two examples are given below

The Net Zero Stack

District assets:

Environmental health
Waste & recycling
Climate strategies
Local Community
Walking and
Infrastructure plans
Air quality
management

- ✓ Increased active travel
- ✓ Reduced carbon emissions
- ✓ Reduced waste, increased reuse and recycling
- ✓ Increase in the use of renewables

Unitary/SA assets

Transport networks
Highways
Fleet procurement
Capital investment

The Modern Digital Council stack

District assets:

Council tax & business rates
Housing benefit
Customer contact centres
Links with towns and parishes

- ✓ Single front door for all residents
- ✓ Combined data provides a comprehensive area wide picture
- ✓ Analysis provides insights into where interventions would be beneficial

Unitary/SA assets

Digital platforms
• Troubled families data
Wider region data
Observatories
Partner data

Creating the right culture from the start

Without intending it, a drawn-out sequential process of creating new organisations can lead to the development of a set of cultural norms that will limit their potential. The programme aims to create the conditions for a positive culture to be built from the get-go:

Process driven

The correctness of decision making, risk aversion, rigidity



By developing leaders and building data, evidence, and strategic choices the new organisations can deliver larger benefit quicker

Results driven

Outcomes achieved, risk taking, flexibility, creativity

Sociocracy

Familiarity, specific skills, relationships



Because all skills and capabilities are recognised and integrated. Appointments are based on transformational abilities not on familiarity and incumbency

Meritocracy

Transferrable skills, achievement, potential

Org leadership

Internal, structures, hierarchy



Early focus on the alliances necessary to work together to deliver better outcomes
Partners are engaged and contribute to the development of the new organisations

Systems leadership

External, networks, engagement

Past focus

History, past success, tacit assumptions



Staff participate in and hence become committed to the new organisation and its goals

Future focus

Renewal, transformation, design principles

Levels of participation

Different permutations are possible but the greater the number of participants the more possibilities there are.

Level	Description	Leadership development offer	Project participation	Commercial relationship
Programme designer	Full participant in the design and delivery of the programme.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in co-design/delivery • All leadership summits • Game changer assessment and feedback • Individual coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in challenge and project design • Membership of all relevant project teams • Project team coaching and facilitation 	Proportionate contribution to the costs of the programme
Programme participant	A full participant in all aspects of the programme with an opportunity to influence design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All leadership summits • Game changer assessment and feedback • Individual coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership of all relevant project teams • Project team coaching and facilitation 	If not programme designer than payment on a pay to play basis for each individual, rate tbc
Project participant	A participant as a partner in the work of the projects	None	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participant in selected projects • Expectation that the sponsoring organisation contributes regular time, date etc. to the work of the project team 	No payment required