WHITE PAPER

# **Making LGR work:** Practical steps from councils who have done it

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# **Making LGR work:** Practical steps from councils who have done it

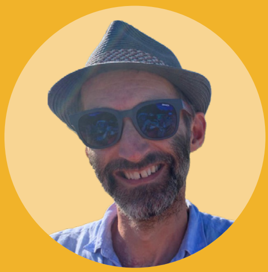
Civiteq hosted a virtual round table specifically for senior leaders in local government who are facing Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). On the round table's panel were experienced professionals from councils and national bodies who have led or supported digital and ICT transformation through LGR. The insights they share, summarised in this whitepaper, are grounded in real-world delivery, strategic planning, and post-vesting day operations.

## Panel Chair

### Kate Hurr – Assistant Director for Digital and ICT, Cumberland Council

Kate is leading the digital and ICT services for Cumberland Council, formed in 2023 from three district councils and part of Cumbria County Council. Kate now oversees the provision of an ICT hosted service for both Cumberland and neighbouring Westmorland & Furness Council, as well as Cumbria Fire & Rescue Service and is responsible for splitting the former county council ICT service into these new organisations, alongside merging the former district teams. Kate shared her insights from the key role she played in pre-day one planning for customer and digital services, including websites and service access, and offers deep experience in merging services and managing shared ICT infrastructure post-LGR.

## Our speakers



### James Ailward – Head of IT Operations, Dorset Council

James managed IT operations through Dorset's LGR in 2019, which merged seven councils into one unitary authority. James is experienced in both aggregation (merging services) and disaggregation (splitting services), particularly where Christchurch moved to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council. At this event James shares his long-term perspective on sustaining ICT operations and adapting structures post-LGR.

### Rebekah Wilson – Programme Manager, Local Government Association (LGA)

Rebekah leads sector support programmes for digital capabilities and the new LG Horizons initiative. She oversees the LGA's "DDaT Readiness" workstream, supporting councils with digital, data and technology considerations during LGR. At this event Rebekah shared information gathered as part of a recent national research project interviewing officers from unitary authorities created since 2019.

### Andy Kennell – Service Director for ICT, Somerset Council

Andy led ICT through Somerset's LGR in April 2023, merging five councils into one unitary authority. Andy navigated complexities including outsourced ICT services and ongoing disaggregation. At this event Andy shared his experience of devolving services to town and parish councils, offering valuable insight into post-vesting day challenges and opportunities.

# How do you begin to understand your starting position for LGR?

For senior leaders embarking on LGR, establishing a clear understanding of your starting position is critical. Dorset, Cumberland and Somerset's experience highlights three essential steps::

## 1. Clarify your day one vision and its implications

Begin by defining what success looks like on vesting day. This means articulating a clear vision for how the new council will operate from day one, particularly in terms of technology, data, and people (both residents and staff). For Dorset, this involved ensuring seamless, 'safe and legal' operations, presenting as a single organisation to residents, and converging democratic processes. However, it's vital to communicate not just the immediate vision, but also its implications for all staff and services beyond day one, to avoid confusion and friction later.

## 2. Start discovery early and be thorough

Early, comprehensive discovery work is essential. Map out your people, processes and technologies, covering; organisational structures, contracts, budgets, technology, business solutions, and data assets for example. Documenting this as a baseline helps you understand the complexity of convergence and identify risks. Dorset's experience showed that delays in this work, or loss of key staff with critical knowledge, can expose gaps, especially where record-keeping is weak, making later integration much harder.

## 3. Secure strong, mandated leadership for the transition

The pre-vesting day phase is marked by uncertainty and anxiety, for both staff and leaders. It's crucial to have a clear, empowered leadership team to drive the transition, broker differing views, and maintain momentum. Without this, you risk entering vesting day without the necessary preparation, which can hinder both immediate operations and the longer-term transformation programme.

## In summary

Understanding your starting position for LGR is not just about technical due diligence; it's about setting a clear vision, communicating it widely, investing in early discovery, and ensuring strong leadership to navigate the complexities and anxieties of change.

**"Discovery work is most valuable if it's documented and shared across the organisation. Taking time to capture and communicate what you've learned helps everyone plan better and builds a shared understanding of where you are and where you want to go."**
says Rebekah Wilson – Programme Manager, Local Government Association (LGA)

# How do you encourage staff to stay with upcoming changes and manage resistance to change during such a period?

Retaining critical staff and managing resistance during LGR is a significant challenge, especially when uncertainty and anxiety are high. Dorset, Cumberland and Somerset's experience offers several practical lessons for senior leaders:

## Acknowledge and address anxiety

Much of the staff turnover during LGR stems from anxiety about the future, particularly fears of a 'takeover' by a dominant partner or concerns about job security. It's essential to tackle these perceptions head-on. Leaders should emphasise that LGR is a co-creation of a new organisation, where everyone has a stake and a future, rather than a takeover by one council over another.

## Shape and own the narrative

Unsettling narratives such as talk of 'winners and losers' or 'takeovers', will inevitably circulate. While you can't prevent all speculation, you can influence the narrative by communicating openly and consistently. By proactively sharing the vision, the reasons for change, and what it means for staff at all levels uncertainty will be reduced and trust will be built.

## Communicate transparently

Staff value honesty over relentless positivity. Acknowledge that the journey will be difficult and that not everyone will find it easy. Transparent communication about challenges, risks, and the realities of change can help staff feel respected and included.

## Create opportunities for involvement

Involve staff in shaping the new organisation wherever possible. This could mean engaging them in working groups, consultation exercises, or decision-making forums. When people feel they have a voice and influence, they are more likely to stay engaged and committed.

## Support emotional responses

Change is unsettling and some staff will choose to leave. Recognise this as part of the process, but also provide support, such as wellbeing resources, regular check-ins, and visible leadership presence, which will help those who remain to navigate the transition.

## In summary

To encourage staff to stay and manage resistance during LGR, leaders must be visible, honest, and empathetic. Address anxieties directly, shape the narrative, communicate transparently, and involve staff in the journey. While some turnover is inevitable, these actions can help retain critical talent and foster a more resilient, unified organisation.

**"Everyone moves through the change curve at their own pace, so it's important to plan a variety of interventions, such as emails and drop-in sessions that show staff exactly what's changing, at different points in the journey. Think about supporting people at a programme level, not just within individual workstreams."** says Alex Fillingham, Digital & Service Transformation Specialist, Civiteq

# What does the governance shadow period look like during LGR, and who is responsible for staff engagement and communication during this time - is the shadow authority involved?

The governance shadow period is one of the most complex and challenging phases of LGR. Dorset, Cumberland and Somerset's experiences highlight several key points for senior leaders:

## Nature and role of the shadow authority

The shadow authority typically operates at the highest strategic level, with a shadow chief executive and shadow elected members. Its primary focus is on preparing for the new council, engaging with government, and setting the direction for vesting day. However, its remit is often quite narrow, mainly concerned with top-level decisions rather than the detailed operational or cultural integration work needed across the organisation.

## Gaps in leadership and engagement

Because the shadow authority's focus is so strategic, much of the day-to-day engagement, communication, and programme management falls to a separate team of senior officers and programme managers. This can leave gaps in leadership and create challenges in resolving differences of opinion, managing resistance, and ensuring consistent communication throughout the organisation.

## Decision-making and uncertainty

The shadow period is marked by uncertainty: you're not quite the old organisation, but not yet the new one. Decision-making can be slow and difficult, with multiple perspectives and interests at play. This can be unsettling for staff, especially as attention shifts to new roles and structures, and as some staff choose to leave, sometimes taking vital knowledge with them.

## Mitigating the challenges

Senior leaders should not underestimate how unsettling the shadow period can be. It's important to plan for deeper engagement and communication than the shadow authority alone can provide. This means ensuring that programme teams are empowered, visible, and well-supported, and that there are clear channels for staff engagement and feedback throughout the transition.

## In summary

The shadow authority plays a crucial but limited role during LGR. Senior leaders must supplement its work with strong, empowered programme teams to drive engagement, manage communication, and support staff through this uniquely challenging period. Recognising and planning for the complexity of the shadow period is essential to a successful transition.

# How did you manage resistance to change when introducing new systems and ways of working, and what advice do you have for keeping staff engaged and helping them move through the change curve?

Managing resistance to change during LGR, especially when introducing new systems and processes, is an ongoing challenge. Somerset's experience highlights several key lessons for senior leaders:

## Prioritise ongoing communication

Change is unsettling, particularly when new systems aren't fully configured or when staff can't yet see how their roles or budgets will look in the new structure. It's vital to communicate early and often, even if all the answers aren't available. Share high-level plans, acknowledge uncertainties, and keep staff informed as details emerge.

## Engage at the right moments

Timing is crucial. Engage staff as early as possible, but also recognise that some aspects of the change will only become clear as systems are built and decisions are made. Be transparent about what is known and what is still being worked through.

## Recognise the context of uncertainty

During the shadow period, many staff may not know who they'll be working for, whether their roles will continue, or what the long-term strategy will be. This uncertainty affects everyone, from senior leaders to frontline staff. Leaders should be mindful that those lower down the organisation may feel even less informed and more anxious.

## Support staff

Acknowledge that this is a uniquely challenging time. Provide support, listen to concerns, and be visible as leaders. Recognise that, for many, this will be one of the most interesting and demanding periods of their careers.

## In summary

There is no single solution to overcoming resistance to change during LGR. Success depends on honest, ongoing communication, engaging staff at the right times, and recognising the scale of uncertainty everyone is facing. Senior leaders must lead with empathy, transparency, and resilience to help staff move through the change curve together.

# Do you have any advice on how best to communicate with staff during LGR?

One of the biggest lessons is to communicate with staff as openly and frequently as possible, but in a way that's relevant to their roles. Avoid overwhelming people with technical details they don't need, but don't shy away from explaining what's happening and why—even if it's complex or challenging.

Tailor your messages so staff understand how changes will affect their day-to-day work, and coordinate communications across different teams to avoid confusion or mixed messages. Remember, too, that some updates can become politicised or misunderstood, so clarity and timing are key. Ultimately, the more you can keep people informed and involved, the smoother the transition will be.

# Several years on from LGR, are you still running legacy systems now?

The journey to fully converge systems following LGR is complex and often takes several years. Experiences from Dorset, Somerset, and Cumberland councils highlight the following key points:

## Primary systems can be converged, but it takes time

Most councils have managed to converge their primary solutions - such as finance, HR, and core business systems, within two to three years. However, there are often a few outlier or niche systems that remain in use for longer, especially where technical or contractual complexities exist.

## Convergence is a phased process

The process typically involves moving staff onto a single system where possible, decommissioning legacy platforms in stages, and sometimes taking interim steps e.g. converging onto an incumbent solution before transitioning to a new cloud-based system.

## Not all systems can be easily unified

Some systems, even from the same supplier, may be on different versions or hosted in different environments, making technical convergence challenging. In these cases, councils may need to maintain multiple instances or negotiate combined licensing arrangements until a longer-term solution is found..

## Disaggregation and aggregation can run in parallel

In some cases, such as Cumberland, the focus has been both on splitting out solutions from a former county council and aggregating new ones for the unitary authority. This dual process can extend the timeline for full convergence, especially for complex areas like social care.

## A long-term journey

Full convergence of all systems is a long-term journey - often five years or more. Councils should expect to run some legacy systems in parallel for several years post-LGR, particularly for specialist or complex services.

## In summary

While most councils achieve convergence of their main systems within a few years of LGR, running some legacy systems in parallel is common and often necessary. Senior leaders should plan for a phased, flexible approach, recognising that technical, contractual, and organisational complexities will shape the pace and scope of system integration.

**"We used public contract rules Regulation 72 to extend contracts without competition and we use that quite extensively for a number of years after vesting day in order to buy us time."** says James Ailward – Head of IT Operations, Dorset Council

# How did you manage expectations around the scale of transformation and efficiency opportunities, while also addressing the costs and complexities involved in both disaggregation and aggregation during LGR?

Managing expectations about transformation, efficiency, and the true costs and complexities of LGR is an ongoing challenge. Dorset, Cumberland and Somerset's experiences highlight several important lessons for senior leaders:

## Set realistic expectations early

Initial assumptions about costs, contract splits, and timelines often prove optimistic. For example, splitting contracts between two new authorities may result in higher costs for each, not lower. Similarly, rolling contracts forward for a set period can create future bottlenecks when everything comes up for renewal at once. It's vital to have honest, ongoing conversations with leaders and stakeholders about what is achievable, what will be required, and what the real costs and risks are.

## Communicate the complexity and pace of change

The scale of technical and organisational change is significant. Unlike business-as-usual, LGR often requires running multiple major programmes - new HR and finance systems, tenancy migrations, IT upgrades - all at once, rather than sequentially. This places huge demands on resources and requires clear, non-technical explanations to staff about why changes are happening and how they will be affected.

## Plan for the unexpected

Not all complexities can be anticipated. Decisions about IT, data centres, and organisational structures may need to be pragmatic, focusing on the lowest cost and least disruptive options, even if they aren't perfect. Sometimes, this means adopting existing systems rather than building new ones from scratch, or making compromises to maintain operational stability.

## Ensure depth in leadership and decision-making

The shadow authority and senior leadership must be empowered to make detailed, informed decisions, not just at the strategic level, but also on the technical and operational realities of convergence. Without this depth, tensions between former authorities can persist, and critical decisions may be delayed or made without full understanding of their implications.

## In summary

Managing expectations around transformation and efficiency in LGR requires ongoing, transparent dialogue, a willingness to confront complexity, and pragmatic decision-making. Senior leaders must be prepared to communicate honestly about costs, risks, and the pace of change, and to ensure that leadership is equipped to make detailed, informed decisions throughout the process.

# What are the key considerations to get to safe and legal for day one?

Achieving 'safe and legal' status for day one is a fundamental requirement in LGR, but it comes with significant complexity and risk. Dorset, Cumberland and Somerset's experience highlights several key considerations:

## Focus on continuity, not perfection

The primary goal is to ensure that all essential services and systems operate as they did the day before, with minimal disruption for residents and staff. This often means making pragmatic decisions, such as standardising email addresses, ensuring access to core systems (like finance and HR), and enabling staff to log in across all sites, while accepting that some legacy issues will need to be addressed later.

## Understand the limits of 'safe and legal'

While 'safe and legal' is a necessary baseline, it can sometimes delay more difficult decisions. Some solutions put in place for day one may only be temporary and could quickly become unfit for purpose as the new authority settles in. Leaders should be mindful that what works on day one may need urgent review on day two and beyond.

## Plan for data, systems, and cybersecurity

Migrating data, consolidating systems, and ensuring a single network are major undertakings. There will be a need to manage large volumes of legacy data and address issues like duplicate applications. Cybersecurity is a critical consideration, especially as the new authority may inherit vulnerabilities from legacy systems. Immediate attention to tightening security post-vesting day is essential.

## Be realistic about timeframes

The period between the decision to proceed with LGR and vesting day can be unpredictable, with potential delays and political sensitivities impacting progress. This can compress already tight timelines for technical and operational integration, making it even more important to prioritise and focus on what is truly essential for day one.

## Avoid 'safe and legal' becoming a barrier

While the phrase 'safe and legal' is important, it can sometimes be used to block progress or avoid tackling more complex issues. Leaders should ensure it remains a helpful guiding principle, not a reason to defer necessary change.

## In summary

Getting to 'safe and legal' for day one is about ensuring continuity, making pragmatic choices, and being clear-eyed about what can be achieved in the time available. It requires strong leadership, clear prioritisation, and a readiness to address the next wave of challenges immediately after vesting day, particularly around cybersecurity and system integration.

**"There are some really big decisions to be made; what are you actually going to do to get 'safe and legal' and is it going to cause you a problem going forward?"** says Andy Kennell – Service Director for ICT, Somerset Council

# Given the tight timescales for LGR, what actions or priorities would you recommend to ensure a successful transition when time is limited?

Whilst the timeframe for LGR may sound daunting. Experience from leaders at Dorset, Cumberland and Somerset's councils should reassure others that essentials can be done. But when time is short, the key is to focus relentlessly on the essentials for day one, while keeping an eye on the longer-term transformation. The councils' experience highlights several priorities:

## Prioritise a safe and legal day one

Your first responsibility is to ensure that core services, such as email, website, finance, HR, telephony, and crucially building access, are operational and secure from day one. This is non-negotiable, as any failure here risks service disruption and reputational damage.

## Balance immediate needs with long-term vision

While day one readiness is critical, don't lose sight of your longer-term ambitions. Begin early conversations about your future technology, data, and workforce needs, even if you can't finalise everything before vesting day. This parallel planning helps maintain momentum beyond the initial transition.

## Conduct a thorough audit of systems and contracts

Map out your current systems, contracts, and assets in detail. Identify duplication, end-of-life risks, and areas for quick consolidation. The more you know about your starting point, the fewer surprises you'll face, especially with legacy systems and hidden issues.

## Be pragmatic about what can wait

Not everything needs to be resolved for day one. Distinguish between 'red lines' (critical for launch) and issues that can be addressed in a post-day one programme of work. This pragmatic approach helps manage workload and expectations.

## Invest in experienced programme management

With compressed timelines, experienced programme management is vital. They can help coordinate the technical, operational, and cultural aspects of the transition, ensuring nothing critical is missed and that the organisation is ready for both day one, day two and beyond.

## Plan for the human element

Recognise that staff may be anxious or protective of their roles and knowledge. Encourage openness and honesty about challenges, and create a culture where issues can be surfaced and addressed without fear.

Continued on next page

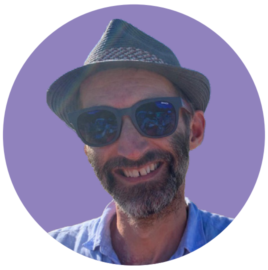
## In summary

Focus on delivering a safe, legal, and seamless day one for residents and staff. Audit your systems and contracts thoroughly, be clear about what must be done now versus what can wait, and ensure strong programme management. At the same time, start shaping your long-term vision and workforce plans to set the foundation for future success.

“I think the key is drilling into what are your contracts, what products have people got and what is on the road map for some of these products as well” says Andy Kennell, Somerset Council.

“The more you understand your technology landscape before day one, the better. Focus on the basics, like building access, printing, and payroll, because these are critical for a functioning organisation. Be pragmatic about what must be ready for launch and what can be tackled after; not everything needs to be solved on day one” says Kate Hurr, Cumberland Council

# What's the one thing you wish you'd known before embarking on LGR?



## James:

A key lesson is the need for pragmatic, decisive leadership and space for open conversations about the future vision, especially for technology. Without early discussions about what the future should look like beyond just 'safe and legal' requirements, it becomes difficult to engage people or design the right structures for the new organisation. The absence of clear leadership and future-focused dialogue makes it much harder to plan effectively and bring others along on the journey.

**"If I had my time again, maybe having some thought about what we think that new organisation might look like from a technology and data perspective might be helpful"** says James Ailward, Dorset Council

## Andy:

The most important thing I wish I'd understood before starting LGR is just how critical it is to build a collaborative governance environment from the very beginning. This means creating opportunities for people at all levels, not just senior leaders, to be engaged, feel heard, and understand the reasons behind key decisions, even if they don't always agree with them. As the process moves forward and staff transition from their legacy councils, this sense of involvement becomes increasingly important. Early on, it's easy to underestimate how much uncertainty and lack of clear authority can slow progress, especially during the shadow authority phase when decision-making structures are unclear. Starting collaboration early, despite the challenges, is essential for building alignment and trust.

## Kate:

One of my biggest takeaways is that we often focus too much on the differences between organisations coming together, rather than investing time in understanding our common ground and each other as individuals. Challenging conversations are inevitable, especially when people approach issues from very different perspectives, but taking the time to understand colleagues' motivations can reveal shared goals - like doing the best for residents, even if the approaches differ. It's easy to overlook this human element when managing complex programmes, but building relationships and seeking commonality is crucial. You also need to be prepared for some emotional ups and downs, as people will leave and the process can be destabilising. Developing emotional resilience and being kind to yourself and others is an important part of navigating such a long and demanding transition.

**"One of my lessons is that we should have spent more time finding common ground and understanding each other's motivations rather than focusing on our differences"**

**"It's a real opportunity to rethink how you deliver services and drive transformation for your local area. There's huge potential, but you have to be pragmatic and realistic about the timescales - and stay focused on improving outcomes for residents, even when the process feels challenging."** says Kate Hurr, Cumberland Council.

## Rebekah:

**"Be prepared for unexpected costs - licensing changes, system splits, or needing consultants can all add up. You won't always know what you're dealing with until you're in it, so build in as much awareness and contingency as you can."** says, Rebekah Wilson, LGA.

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