

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

DEVOLUTION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT RE-ORGANISATION CABINET COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Devolution and Local Government Re-organisation Cabinet Committee held in the Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Tuesday, 30 September 2025.

PRESENT: Mr M Harrison, Mr O Bradshaw, Mr M Brown, Mr P Chamberlain, Mr W Chapman, Ms S Emberson, Mr J Eustace, Mrs M Fothergill, Mr J Henderson, Mr C Hespe, Mr A J Hook, Mr H Rayner, Mr P Stepto (Substitute for Mr M A J Hood) and Mrs P Williams

ALSO PRESENT: Mr A Kennedy, Ms L Kemkaran and Ms C Russell

OFFICERS: Amanda Beer (Chief Executive), Jenny Dixon-Sherreard (Strategy Manger), Dave Shipton (Head of Financial Strategy), Ben Watts (General Counsel), David Whittle (Director for Strategy Policy Relationships & Corporate Assurance), Tim Woolmer (Head of Strategic Partnerships), and James Clapson (Democratic Services Officer).

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

6. Apologies and Substitutes
(Item 1)

Apologies were received from Mr Brady, Mr Ellis and Mr Hood who was substituted by Mr Stepto.

7. Declarations of Interest
(Item 2)

There were no declarations of interest.

8. Minutes of the meeting held on 28.7.2025
(Item 3)

RESOLVED that the minutes be signed by the Chair as a correct record of the meeting.

9. Overview and update on collaborative Local Government Reorganisation work through Kent Council Leaders
(Item 4)

1. Mrs Kemkaran (Leader of the Council) introduced the item, advising that the paper provided an overview of the collaborative work undertaken between the Kent and Medway authorities, and included details of the next steps.
2. Mr Woolmer presented the report, during which he made the following key points:
 - a. The paper focused on the external work that had taken place between KCC and its partners.
 - b. This joint working was based upon a history of collaborative working between the authorities.
 - c. There was no agreement on a single proposal, however all parties were committed to the joint process and were working to achieve the best outcome for residents.
3. The following comments were made by the Committee during consideration of the item:
 - a. There was concern that there was a lack of public input.
 - b. Local government re-organisation (LGR) without devolution, to create a mayoral authority, would lead to a poorer outcome for residents. KCC should continue to press Government to allow Kent and Medway to enter a devolution programme.
4. The Officers provided the following responses to questions raised:
 - a. Officers had liaised with councils outside of Kent who were at different stages of the LGR process to see what lessons could be learnt from their experiences.
 - b. The Government's guidelines around splitting district areas indicated that it was possible, but only in exceptional circumstances where there was a strong rationale to do so.
 - c. The Government had not shared a process or timeline for council's not on the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP), to create a mayoral authority.
 - d. Many Kent leaders felt that it was unequal for Kent to be the only area in the South East of England not to be on the DPP.
 - e. There had been a collaborative effort between the Kent and Medway Authorities to raise public awareness of LGR. There would also be a formal consultation process following the submissions to the Government in November.
 - f. The majority of the work to develop the KCC submission was being undertaken by KCC officers. Mr Whittle offered to estimate of the cost of this work and would advise Members outside of the meeting.
 - g. There was a judicial review case in Cumbria where the Government's timeline and implementation deadline remained unchanged.
5. RESOLVED that the Cabinet Committee:
 - a. Note the joint work to date and the process leading up to 28 November 2025 submission date, the ongoing collaboration between all 14 Councils and the geographies in scope for Strategic Business Case development.
 - b. Note the commitment to continue to engage with this Committee on the collaborative process as and when appropriate.

10. Kent County Council's position on Local Government Reorganisation and next steps
(Item 5)

1. Mrs Kemkaran introduced the item, highlighting that the administration had identified that a single unitary council with three area assemblies was its preferred option for LGR in Kent and Medway.
2. Ms Dixon-Sherreard presented the report, during which she made the following key points:
 - a. KCC was developing its submission independently of the other Kent and Medway authorities, and was largely using in-house resources to complete the work.
 - b. The preferred option could offer the best value as it incorporated the cost benefits leveraged by having a large unitary, while retaining some locality connections through the three area assemblies.
 - c. KCC was working with KPMG to develop the financial case, this would ensure that it was comparable with the financial cases in the business cases developed by the other authorities.
 - d. The tight time scale limited public engagement; however, key stakeholders have been contacted, and a public survey had begun.
3. The Chair permitted Mr Kennedy and Mrs Russell to address the Committee about the item. The following points were raised during and in response to their addresses:
 - a. There was a concern that a single unitary would create the largest council in Europe. Due to its size, it may struggle to represent and respond to the needs of residents at a local level.
 - b. The three area assemblies would be created at the same time as the unitary authority.
 - c. The costs of running the area assemblies would be calculated and included in the business case.
4. The following comments were made by the Committee during consideration of the item:
 - a. The loss of local Councillors and Councils could lead to a loss of local knowledge and local decision making.
 - b. It was important that the public understood that LGR was not a KCC initiative.
 - c. No other Kent or Medway authority Leader was in favour of the proposal to have a single unitary authority.
 - d. Three councils would have stronger democratic safeguards than area assemblies who could more easily be disempowered by an administration in the future.
 - e. A single unitary authority would enable tax equalisation across the whole area.
 - f. Officers deserved recognition for their effort in preparing the Administration's position within such a short timescale.
5. The Officers provided the following responses to questions raised:
 - a. It was recognised that public awareness of LGR was very low. The Kent Leaders agreed a joint communications campaign, administered through Canterbury City Council, to help ensure a consistent message was released. So far, KCC had been very robust in steering the communications strategy and activity.
 - b. An official public consultation exercise would be co-ordinated by the Government ahead of making its decision. KCC's duty would be to publicise the consultation and encourage public participation.
 - c. The draft business case would include details about the structure of the proposed area assemblies.
 - d. Officers were currently looking at what constitutional protections could be extended to area assemblies. The business case would include some protection recommendations; however, implementation of these protections would be at the discretion of the new unitary authority.

- e. The business cases would enable people to make a direct comparison of the disaggregation costs of each option.
 - f. A single unitary authority would not meet the Government's current requirements for devolution because there must be at least two constituent authorities involved.
 - g. Kent residents could be offered a referendum on LGR; however, it would cost around £3.5million and the Government would not be legally bound to act upon the result.
6. Mr Hook proposed and Mr Stepto seconded that the following amendment be added to the recommendations:
- a. that the Cabinet Committee oppose the proposal for a single unitary authority for Kent and Medway.
7. Upon being put to the vote the amendment fell.
8. RESOLVED that the Cabinet Committee:
- a. Note KCC's position on the development of its business case for Local Government Reorganisation in Kent and Medway
 - b. Note the commitment from KCC to continue to take part in the joint work to support the development of a shared evidence base to inform the development of all business cases for Kent and Medway
 - c. Note the next steps to develop KCC's business case by the government deadline.

11. Key Financial Statistics *(Item 6)*

- 1. Mrs Kemkaran introduced the item, that detailed some of the key financial metrics that a new unitary authority would inherit from the existing councils. She highlighted that the report detailed the debts and current council tax rates of each of the 14 existing councils, and the distribution of KCC social care clients across the existing district areas.
- 2. Mr Shipton presented the report and made the following key points:
 - a. The report was based upon the most up to date financial data available, it did not attempt to predict future costs.
 - b. The harmonisation of council tax rates would need to be achieved by year eight, and the any rules regarding the triggers for council tax referendums would need to be adhered to.
 - c. The 2024/25 outturn for Kent, while not fully finalised, provided a very good indication of the position.
- 3. The Chair permitted Mrs Russell to address the Committee about the item. In response to her comments it was advised that work was underway with each of the 14 councils to evaluate how their debts were being managed. Usually, the financial data became available two or three months after each quarter.
- 4. The following comments were made by Members during consideration of the item:

- a. If the Government decided upon a three or four unitary authority solution, then the Eastern unitary authority would be the weakest financially, and would potentially need additional government funding.
 - b. LGR could lead to a loss of localised democracy and there needed to be public consultation.
 - c. There was concern that the process could leave some areas with higher council tax charges.
 - d. A single unitary authority would avoid some of the complexity that would arise from the disaggregation of the existing councils into multiple unitary authorities.
5. The Officers provided the following responses to questions raised:
- a. The findings of the Fair Funding Review 2.0 would be announced soon. It was believed that this would result in some additional funding to areas with the greatest social care need.
 - b. KCC had flagged to the Government in its response to Fair Funding 2.0 how important it would be to the success of any new unitary authority, that funding settlements were based upon actual levels of need.
 - c. The apportionment and spread of debts would be agreed after a decision had been made by the Government.
 - d. There could be a Members Briefing following the November submission that looked at the relationship between the debts and assets of the 14 councils, and how this would feed into implementation planning.
 - e. The Kent Pension Fund would remain, and there were a few options of how it could continue be administered. More detail about the pension arrangements would be brought before Members when it became available.
 - f. A single unitary authority was shown in table 5 of the report to have less variation in council tax rates than across the existing districts. The amount of council tax variation increased as the number of unitary authorities increased.
6. RESOLVED that the Cabinet Committee note the key financial statistics.

12. Work Programme *(Item 7)*

- 1. RESOLVED to note the work programme.