

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

COUNTY COUNCIL

MINUTES of a meeting of the County Council held in the Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Thursday, 9 January 2025.

PRESENT: Mr N Baker, Mr M Baldock, Mr P V Barrington-King, Mr P Bartlett, Mrs C Bell, Mrs R Binks, Mr T Bond, Mr A Booth, Mr A Brady, Mr D L Brazier, Mr C Broadley, Mrs B Bruneau, Mr T Cannon, Sir Paul Carter, CBE, Mrs S Chandler, Mr N J D Chard, Mr I S Chittenden, Mrs P T Cole, Mr P Cole, Ms K Constantine, Mr G Cooke, Mr D Crow-Brown, Mr M C Dance, Mrs T Dean, MBE, Mr M Dendor, Mr R W Gough, Ms S Hamilton, Ms J Hawkins, Mr P M Hill, OBE, Mr A R Hills, Mrs S V Hohler, Mr S Holden, Mr M A J Hood, Mr A J Hook, Mrs S Hudson, Mr D Jeffrey, Mr J A Kite, MBE, Rich Lehmann, Mr B H Lewis, Mr R C Love, OBE, Mr T Mallon, Mr S C Manion, Mr R A Marsh, Mrs M McArthur, Mr J P McInroy, Ms J Meade, Mr D Murphy, Mr P J Oakford, Mr J M Ozog, Ms L Parfitt, Mr C Passmore, Mr H Rayner, Mr O Richardson, Mr D Robey, Mr A Sandhu, MBE, Mr T L Shonk, Mr C Simkins, Mr M J Sole, Mr P Stepto, Mr R G Streatfeild, MBE, Dr L Sullivan, Mr R J Thomas, Mr D Watkins, Mr S Webb, Mr M Whiting, Mr J Wright and Ms L Wright

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr J Cook (Democratic Services Manager) and Mr B Watts (General Counsel)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

Election of Chair

1. Mr Gough proposed, and Mr Brady seconded that Mr G Cooke be elected to Chair the meeting. No other nominations were received.
Agreed unanimously.
2. RESOLVED that Mr Cooke be elected to Chair the meeting.

283. Apologies for Absence (Item 1)

The Democratic Services Manager reported apologies from Mr Beaney, Mr Campkin, Miss Carey, Mr Collor, Mr Cooper, Ms Dawkins, Mrs Game, Mr Kennedy, Mr Meade, Mrs Prendergast, Mr Ridgers, Mr Sweetland and Mr Wright.

Ms Grehan had given her formal apologies but was attending the meeting virtually.

284. Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests in items on the agenda

(Item 2)

Members who were district or borough councillors declared an interest.

285. English Devolution White Paper

(Item 3)

- 1) The Leader introduced the item which he said was the most momentous decision for the Council in many years. He acknowledged the importance of it being considered at Full Council and referred to a strong partnership with Medway Council and an inclusive approach to working with district and borough councils across Kent.
- 2) Mr Gough said he believed that the Council, along with Medway Council, should apply to join the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) and create a Mayoral Combined Authority. He stressed the importance of seizing the opportunities that devolution would bring to the county and Kent residents. He referred to the Local Government Association Conference where Mr Jim McMahon MP made it clear that this was a structured policy for England as a whole; as a result the remaining two-tier areas were expected to submit initial unitary proposals by March 2025. He said change was coming and the sooner the Council engaged with it, the sooner it could shape it and provide clarity to residents, staff and organisations. Mr Gough explained that over the last decade mayoral authorities had become part of the national landscape, particularly in the north, with local authorities across the south now applying to join the DPP.
- 3) The Leader noted the potential implications of being accepted on the programme for the Council elections due in May 2025. He explained that the decision to postpone the elections would be made by central government following a request from councils. He recognised and shared the unease felt by Members but said there were many precedents for postponed elections during profound structural change and commented that it was hard to see how a government-led consultation so close to the pre-election period could be carried out successfully. Mr Gough stated his intention, if the Council applied to join the DPP, to submit a request to government to postpone the elections.
- 4) Mr Gough stressed the importance of establishing the right relationship between a strong mayor and strong unitary authorities and noted the risks and challenges in relation to reorganisation. He said the present situation of the Council was financially unsustainable due to national policy decisions and the Council did not have the funding or the capacity to be the strategic authority that Kent needed. The Leader said that a mayoral strategic authority, on the building blocks of an elected mayor and strong unitary authorities, could deliver a strategic role in transport, planning, economic development and public service reform. He said Kent and Medway were perfectly placed to maximise the benefits of public service reform by joining

up services and building a partnership involving greater democratic input with the NHS. He said devolution would bring dedicated investment funds and a decisive move away from competitive funding pots. Central government and mayoral authorities would shape the future development of devolution and the Leader expressed his wish that Kent, through a mayoral strategic authority, be part of that debate through membership of the Mayoral Council and the Council of the Nations and Regions. The Leader reiterated the fundamental decision that was before the Council and asked Members to recognise that the Council could not go on as it was and to seize the opportunity to shape the future of something different and better.

5) Mr Gough proposed, and Mr Oakford seconded the motion that

“County Council is asked to:

- (1) **Endorse** the ongoing joint work between KCC, Medway Council and District and Borough Council Leaders to respond the English Devolution White Paper
- (2) **Endorse** the proposed decision by the Leader of the Council [Cabinet] to submit a request to Government, jointly with Medway Council, for Kent and Medway to be included in the Devolution Priority Programme
- (3) **Note** that acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme will commit Kent and Medway to elections to a new Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) in May 2026 and implementation of local government reorganisation by either April 2027 or April 2028
- (4) **Note** that acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme may lead to the County Council elections scheduled for May 2025 being postponed subject to ministerial decision”

6) The Leader of the Labour Group, Mr Brady, commented on the growth of the UK economy over the last 14 years, stagnating living standards for working people and the decline of local councils. He noted that something new was required and referred positively to a focus within the English Devolution White Paper on growth, joined up delivery of public services, service delivery costs, and value for money for residents.

7) Mr Brady spoke about the proposals in the White Paper and how unitary councils could deliver better outcomes for residents. He mentioned skills and employment support, local decision making on transport and clean energy, a leading role in local nature recovery strategies, and a focus on the visitor economy and supporting businesses. He said there was a focus in the White Paper to strengthen communities with greater rights to be involved in local issues, as well as a new right to buy valued community assets. He stressed the need to reform public services with a focus on prevention and programs built more closely around people and the places they live. Although Mr Brady felt there was agreement for these provisions, he believed that local government reform should take precedence. He stressed the importance for residents to know how services and improvements would be delivered and commented that getting it right was a priority over how quickly it could be achieved.

- 8) Mr Brady said it was clear in the White Paper that the Government wanted to work with local authorities and that the decision to postpone an election should come from the Council before it would be considered by government. He stressed the importance of clarity for residents over a decision to postpone the elections and said his group was interested to hear the views, arguments and recommendations from Members during the debate that would follow.
- 9) The Leader of the Green & Independents Group, Mr Lehmann, referred to the government letter sent to council leaders in July 2024 asking for expressions of interest in devolution which stated that they would not force areas to take on a mayor. He questioned the keenness of the leaders of the Council and Medway Council for the proposals and whether the financial circumstances of the councils had weakened their ability to push for a more beneficial deal. He commented that in the autumn of 2024 he was advised that unitarisation would take years but in early December there were rumours of cancelled elections and a fast-track program.
- 10) Mr Lehmann commended the Leader for involving district and borough council leaders across Kent in discussions, but commented that the vast majority of Kent's county and district councillors, and in turn Kent residents, were not aware of what had been discussed. He said the future of Kent, should it be placed on the Devolution Priority Programme, would be made in the space of just 25 days and would include the risk of elections in May being cancelled.
- 11) Mr Lehmann spoke about the content of the White Paper and said mentions of devolution meant little when the passing of power from government was to a newly created and undetermined level. Mr Lehmann said the process felt rushed, secretive, constructed as it went along, and lacked democracy. Too much power would be in the hands of a single person who could be subject to low levels of oversight and scrutiny, and this year's elections may need to be cancelled to achieve this. Mr Lehmann questioned what the process could look like if it was slowed down and done properly.
- 12) Mr Hook, Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, explained that the Council had existed since 1889 during which time it had gained and lost powers and territory, but it had been continuously elected without break except for two world wars. He said if local government reorganisation was to proceed there was no reason why the six week election period should disrupt that, technical work by officers could continue and political decisions and leadership could resume after the short break. He noted that there was a risk that it would not be a postponement of just one year but may roll on for two or three years.
- 13) Mr Hook commented on whether a Kent-wide authority should have a leader who was subject to permanent scrutiny by their peers or a mayor who could not be removed for four years unless under specific circumstances. He said Kent and other parts of England should demand the same representative

devolution seen in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and London where there was an assembly in addition to a Mayor and his group had much more faith in a group of people elected by the public with a diversity of life experience and perspectives.

- 14) Mr Hook said there had been a lack of transparency and consultation with the public over the decision to apply for the Devolution Priority Programme and commented on the tight timeframe. He said elections were needed in May 2025 along with transparency and extensive public involvement. He emphasised that important work must continue in areas such as social care and SEND, and stated that a mayor was not needed, the process should not be rushed, and the people of Kent should be given what they want and would benefit from.
- 15) Mr Streatfeild proposed and Mr Sole seconded the following amendment to the motion set out in paragraph 5:

“County Council is asked to:

- (1) **Endorse** the ongoing joint work between KCC, Medway Council and District and Borough Council Leaders to respond the English Devolution White Paper
- (2) **Endorse** the proposed decision by the Leader of the Council [Cabinet] to submit a request to Government, jointly with Medway Council, for Kent and Medway to be included in the Devolution Priority Programme
- (3) **Note** that acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme will commit Kent and Medway to elections to a new Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) in May 2026 and implementation of local government reorganisation by either April 2027 or April 2028
- (4) **Note** that acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme may lead to the County Council elections scheduled for May 2025 being postponed subject to ministerial decision
- (5) **Expects there to be as much transparency as possible in this process.”**

Amendment carried.

- 16) Following the debate, the Chairman put the amendment set out at paragraph 15 to the vote and it was agreed.
- 17) Mr Hood proposed and Mr Baldock seconded the following amendment to the substantive motion set out in paragraph 15:

“County Council is asked to:

- (1) **Endorse** the ongoing joint work between KCC, Medway Council and District and Borough Council Leaders to respond the English Devolution White Paper
- (2) **Comment** that the Council does not support the proposal for Kent and Medway to be included in the Devolution Priority Programme and that

it would prefer to commence the Foundation Strategic Authority route in the fastest possible timeframe

- (2) ~~Endorse~~ the proposed decision by the Leader of the Council [Cabinet] to submit a request to Government, jointly with Medway Council, for Kent and Medway to be included in the Devolution Priority Programme
- (3) ~~Note~~ that acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme will commit Kent and Medway to elections to a new Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) in May 2026 and implementation of local government reorganisation by either April 2027 or April 2028
- (4) ~~Note~~ that acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme may lead to the County Council elections scheduled for May 2025 being postponed subject to ministerial decision
- (5) **(3) Expects** there to be as much transparency as possible in this process.”

18) Following the debate, the Chairman put the amendment set out in paragraph 17 to the vote and the voting was as follows:

For (14)

Mr Baldock, Mr Brady, Ms Constantine, Ms Hawkins, Mr Holden, Mr Hood, Mr Hook, Mr R Lehmann, Mr Lewis, Ms Meade, Mr Passmore, Mr Sole, Mr Streatfeild, Dr Sullivan

Against (45)

Mr Baker, Mr Barrington-King, Mr Bartlett, Mrs Bell, Mrs Binks, Mr Bond, Mr Booth, Mr Brazier, Mr Cannon, Mr Carter, Mrs Chandler, Mr Chard, Mr Cole, Mrs Cole, Mr Crow-Brown, Mr Dance, Mr Dendor, Mr Gough, Ms Hamilton, Mr Hill, Mr Hills, Mrs Hohler, Mrs Hudson, Mr Jeffrey, Mr Kite, Mr Love, Mr Mallon, Mr Manion, Mr Marsh, Mrs McArthur, Mr McInroy, Mr Murphy, Mr Oakford, Mr Ozog, Ms Parfitt, Mr Rayner, Mr Richardson, Mr Robey, Mr Sandhu, Mr Shonk, Mr Simkins, Mr Thomas, Mr Watkins, Mr Whiting, Ms Wright

Abstain (4)

Mrs Bruneau, Mr Chittenden, Mrs Dean, Mr Webb

Amendment lost.

19) Mr Brady proposed and Ms Constantine seconded the following amendment to the substantive motion set out in paragraph 15:

“County Council is asked to:

- (1) **Endorse** the ongoing joint work between KCC, Medway Council and District and Borough Council Leaders to respond the English Devolution White Paper

- (2) **Endorse** the proposed decision by the Leader of the Council [Cabinet] to submit a request to Government, jointly with Medway Council, for Kent and Medway to be included in the Devolution Priority Programme
- (3) **Comment** that the priority should be Local Government Reorganisation to ensure the best outcomes for Kent residents before proceeding to a new Mayoral Strategic Authority.
- ~~(3) **Note** that acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme will commit Kent and Medway to elections to a new Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) in May 2026 and implementation of local government reorganisation by either April 2027 or April 2028~~
- (4) **Recommend** that the council put forward an argument not to postpone the County Council elections in May 2025 and that it should state that this Council's preferred position is for the elections to proceed as scheduled to uphold democracy.
- ~~(4) **Note** that acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme may lead to the County Council elections scheduled for May 2025 being postponed subject to ministerial decision~~
- (5) **Expects** there to be as much transparency as possible in this process."

20) Following the debate, the Chairman put the amendment set out in paragraph 19 to the vote and the voting was as follows:

For (17)

Mr Baldock, Mr Brady, Mrs Bruneau, Mr Chittenden, Ms Constantine, Mrs Dean, Ms Hawkins, Mr Holden, Mr Hood, Mr Hook, Mr R Lehmann, Mr Lewis, Mr Mallon, Ms Meade, Mr Passmore, Mr Streatfeild, Dr Sullivan

Against (43)

Mr Baker, Mr Barrington-King, Mr Bartlett, Mrs Bell, Mrs Binks, Mr Bond, Mr Booth, Mr Brazier, Mr Cannon, Mr Carter, Mrs Chandler, Mr Chard, Mr Cole, Mrs Cole, Mr Crow-Brown, Mr Dance, Mr Dendor, Mr Gough, Ms Hamilton, Mr Hill, Mr Hills, Mrs Hohler, Mr Jeffrey, Mr Kite, Mr Love, Mr Manion, Mr Marsh, Mrs McArthur, Mr McInroy, Mr Murphy, Mr Oakford, Mr Ozog, Ms Parfitt, Mr Rayner, Mr Richardson, Mr Robey, Mr Sandhu, Mr Shonk, Mr Simkins, Mr Thomas, Mr Watkins, Mr Webb, Ms Wright

Abstain (3)

Mrs Hudson, Mr Sole, Mr Whiting

Amendment lost.

21) Mr Passmore proposed and Mr Hook seconded the following amendment to the substantive motion set out in paragraph 15:

"County Council is asked to:

- (1) **Endorse** the ongoing joint work between KCC, Medway Council and District and Borough Council Leaders to respond the English Devolution White Paper
- (2) **Recommend** expressing an interest in devolution of powers, while making clear that:
 - i. Kent prioritises getting the right outcome even if that takes longer than the quickest outcome.
 - ii. The views of the public should be central and consultation should begin before KCC commits itself to any particular outcome.
- ~~(2) **Endorse** the proposed decision by the Leader of the Council [Cabinet] to submit a request to Government, jointly with Medway Council, for Kent and Medway to be included in the Devolution Priority Programme~~
- (3) **Note** that acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme will commit Kent and Medway to elections to a new Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) in May 2026 and implementation of local government reorganisation by either April 2027 or April 2028
- (4) **Note** that acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme may lead to the County Council elections scheduled for May 2025 being postponed subject to ministerial decision
- (5) **Expects** there to be as much transparency as possible in this process.”

22) Following the debate, the Chairman put the amendment set out in paragraph 21 to the vote and the voting was as follows:

For (13)

Mr Baldock, Mrs Bruneau, Mr Chittenden, Mrs Dean, Ms Hawkins, Mr Holden, Mr Hood, Mr Hook, Mr R Lehmann, Mr Lewis, Mr Passmore, Mr Sole, Mr Streatfeild

Against (45)

Mr Baker, Mr Barrington-King, Mr Bartlett, Mrs Bell, Mrs Binks, Mr Bond, Mr Booth, Mr Brazier, Mr Carter, Mrs Chandler, Mr Chard, Mr Cole, Mrs Cole, Mr Crow-Brown, Mr Dance, Mr Dendor, Mr Gough, Ms Hamilton, Mr Hill, Mr Hills, Mrs Hohler, Mrs Hudson, Mr Jeffrey, Mr Kite, Mr Love, Mr Mallon, Mr Manion, Mr Marsh, Mrs McArthur, Mr McInroy, Mr Murphy, Mr Oakford, Mr Ozog, Ms Parfitt, Mr Rayner, Mr Richardson, Mr Robey, Mr Sandhu, Mr Shonk, Mr Simkins, Mr Thomas, Mr Watkins, Mr Webb, Mr Whiting, Ms Wright

Abstain (4)

Mr Brady, Ms Constantine, Ms Meade, Dr Sullivan

Amendment lost.

23) Mr Lehmann proposed and Mr Streatfeild seconded the following amendment to the substantive motion set out in paragraph 15:

“County Council is asked to:

- (1) **Endorse** the ongoing joint work between KCC, Medway Council and District and Borough Council Leaders to respond the English Devolution White Paper
- (2) **Endorse** the proposed decision by the Leader of the Council [Cabinet] to submit a request to Government, jointly with Medway Council, for Kent and Medway to be included in the Devolution Priority Programme
- (3) **Note** that acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme will commit Kent and Medway to elections to a new Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) in May 2026 and implementation of local government reorganisation by either April 2027 or April 2028
- (4) **Recommend** to the Executive, that while the decision on postponement of KCC elections would be for the Minister, the request to join the Devolution Priority Programme should express a strong preference that elections happen as planned in May 2025, recognising the widely expressed concerns at the democratic deficit created by any cancellation of the planned elections.
- ~~(4) **Note** that acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme may lead to the County Council elections scheduled for May 2025 being postponed subject to ministerial decision~~
- (5) **Expects** there to be as much transparency as possible in this process.”

24) Following the debate, the Chairman put the amendment set out in paragraph 23 to the vote and the voting was as follows:

For (14)

Mr Baldock, Mrs Bruneau, Mr Chittenden, Mrs Dean, Ms Hawkins, Mr Holden, Mr Hood, Mr Hook, Mrs Hudson, Mr R Lehmann, Mr Lewis, Mr Mallon, Mr Passmore, Mr Streatfeild

Against (40)

Mr Baker, Mr Barrington-King, Mr Bartlett, Mrs Binks, Mr Bond, Mr Booth, Mr Brazier, Mr Carter, Mrs Chandler, Mr Chard, Mr Cole, Mrs Cole, Mr Crow-Brown, Mr Dance, Mr Dendor, Mr Gough, Ms Hamilton, Mr Hill, Mr Hills, Mrs Hohler, Mr Jeffrey, Mr Kite, Mr Love, Mr Marsh, Mrs McArthur, Mr McInroy, Mr Murphy, Mr Oakford, Mr Ozog, Ms Parfitt, Mr Rayner, Mr Richardson, Mr Robey, Mr Sandhu, Mr Shonk, Mr Simkins, Mr Thomas, Mr Watkins, Mr Webb, Ms Wright

Abstain (7)

Mrs Bell, Mr Brady, Ms Constantine, Ms Meade, Mr Sole, Dr Sullivan, Mr Whiting

Amendment lost.

25) The Chairman put the substantive motion set out in paragraph 15 to the vote and the voting was as follows:

For (39)

Mr Baker, Mr Bartlett, Mrs Bell, Mrs Binks, Mr Bond, Mr Booth, Mr Brazier, Mr Carter, Mrs Chandler, Mr Chard, Mr Cole, Mrs Cole, Mr Crow-Brown, Mr Dance, Mr Dendor, Mr Gough, Ms Hamilton, Mr Hill, Mr Hills, Mrs Hohler, Mr Jeffrey, Mr Kite, Mr Love, Mr Marsh, Mrs McArthur, Mr McInroy, Mr Murphy, Mr Oakford, Ms Parfitt, Mr Rayner, Mr Richardson, Mr Robey, Mr Sandhu, Mr Simkins, Mr Thomas, Mr Watkins, Mr Webb, Mr Whiting, Ms Wright

Against (19)

Mr Baldock, Mr Barrington-King, Mr Brady, Mrs Bruneau, Mr Chittenden, Mrs Dean, Ms Hawkins, Mr Holden, Mr Hood, Mr Hook, Mrs Hudson, Mr R Lehmann, Mr Lewis, Mr Mallon, Ms Meade, Mr Passmore, Mr Shonk, Mr Streatfeild, Dr Sullivan

Abstain (1)

Ms Constantine

Substantive Motion carried.

26) RESOLVED that the County Council:

- (1) **Endorses** the ongoing joint work between KCC, Medway Council and District and Borough Council Leaders to respond to the English Devolution White Paper
- (2) **Endorses** the proposed decision by the Leader of the Council [Cabinet] to submit a request to Government, jointly with Medway Council, for Kent and Medway to be included in the Devolution Priority Programme
- (3) **Notes** that acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme will commit Kent and Medway to elections to a new Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) in May 2026 and implementation of local government reorganisation by either April 2027 or April 2028
- (4) **Notes** that acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme may lead to the County Council elections scheduled for May 2025 being postponed subject to ministerial decision
- (5) **Expects** there to be as much transparency as possible in this process.