

From: Linden Kemkaran, Leader
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To: **Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation Cabinet Committee – 30 September 2025**

Subject: Overview and update on collaborative Local Government Reorganisation work through Kent Council Leaders

Classification: **Unrestricted**

Summary:

This paper provides an overview of the collaborative work to date on Local Government Reorganisation at a Kent and Medway level between Kent County Council, Medway Council and Kent's 12 District and Borough Councils.

This includes the process for developing a shared evidence base and business cases, the timeline and key milestones leading up to 28 November 2025 submission date, and next steps.

Recommendations:

The Cabinet Committee is asked to:

- (1) **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
 - (2) **Note** the commitment to continue to engage with this Committee on the collaborative process as and when appropriate.
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1. Background

- 1.1 Kent & Medway's 14 Local Authorities have a strong history of working closely together on shared risks and opportunities, lobbying on significant areas of common interest, and on responding collectively to strategic developments nationally or regionally. This is primarily through existing groups including *Kent Council Leaders* (a group made up of Kent's 14 elected Council Leaders) and *Joint Kent Chief Executives* (a group made up of the Chief Officers of Kent's 14 Local Authorities alongside our wider strategic local partners).
- 1.2 On 16 December 2024, HM Government published the *English Devolution White Paper* setting out its ambition to reshape local government in England. This would be through a combination of devolution to new strategic authorities and reorganisation of all of the remaining two-tier local government areas in England into unitaries. The *English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill* published on 10 July 2025 formalised HM Government's intentions to enact these changes.
- 1.3 In response to the White Paper, Council Leaders in Kent were invited to apply

for, and submitted a formal request to receive priority status to be included in the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP). If successful, this would have accelerated the devolution process and provided additional Government support for those Councils on the DPP.

- 1.4 On 5 February 2025 Government notified Councils in Kent and Medway in a letter from the then Local Government Minister that they were not selected to be on the DPP, and instead received a statutory invitation to submit proposals for Local Government reorganisation (LGR). This included guidance around the development of proposals and an expectation that all 14 Councils would collaborate.
- 1.5 The letter detailed a timeline for the process, including a requirement for a joint interim proposal by 21 March 2025 setting out direction of travel and intentions, and a deadline of 28 November 2025 to receive a final submission on reorganisation. Kent Council Leaders agreed to endeavour to work together to respond to the Minister's direction.
- 1.6 On 21 March 2025, Kent Council Leaders submitted an interim response setting out the councils' commitment to working together on reorganisation, highlighting examples of exceptional challenges faced only by Kent, the importance of aligning devolution with reorganisation and the risks of not having a strategic countywide body for Kent. Alongside the collective response signed by all 14 Council Leaders, there were a number of 'side letters' from individual councils in Kent, including KCC.
- 1.7 Work is now ongoing at pace in preparation for meeting the 28 November 2025 submission deadline.

2. Current work

- 2.1 Government have been clear that councils are expected to work together to develop LGR proposals for their areas. Each area nationally has been awarded funding to contribute towards the development of proposals. Kent and Medway were awarded £514,410.
- 2.2 Kent Council Leaders agreed to use this money collectively to develop a shared evidence base, options appraisal and business case(s) to prepare for the 28 November 2025 submission, and procure the necessary external support and expertise to meet the deadline. KPMG were appointed as Kent and Medway's Strategic Business Partner following a joint procurement process for Phases 1 and 2 as set out below and commenced work with all 14 Councils in July 2025.
- 2.3 The work is split into 4 phases as follows:

Phase 1 – Evidence Base and Options Appraisal

KPMG work with all 14 Councils to develop a single, impartial, shared

evidence base and options appraisal, identifying a long-list of options (geographies) and appraising them according to the Minister's specified criteria. This work then underpins Kent Council Leaders' decision on which options to proceed to full business case.

Phase 2 – Strategic Business Case Development

Informed by Kent Council Leaders' decision, KPMG will then work with all 14 Councils on preparing and refining the chosen options into strategic business cases in preparation for 28 November 2025 submission deadline.

Phases 3 and 4 – Ongoing Support to Vesting Day Requirements

Following Ministerial decision, significant work will then be required to prepare for transition from the existing 14 Councils to the new Unitary Council(s) in a safe and legal way. Phase 3 will run from Ministerial decision to election to shadow authority(s), and Phase 4 from election to shadow authority(s) to vesting day (the day upon which formal responsibility is handed over).

- 2.4 A further procurement process will be required for any additional external support determined necessary for Phases 3 and 4. The existing contract with KPMG is for Phases 1 and 2 only.
- 2.5 At an extraordinary Kent Council Leaders meeting on 03 September 2025, Leaders were presented with the evidence base and options appraisal assembled by KPMG colleagues with significant input from staff across all 14 Councils. There were seven geographies in scope (see appendix 1).
- 2.6 As per the governance jointly set around the strategic business partner contract and the funding from Government, each Leader was asked to select the option they would support progressing to strategic business case, the two with the most support then being prioritised for the collective process. As a result of the vote, Options 3a and 4b were selected to progress.
- 2.7 Leaders were then asked to vote on whether they would like to progress any additional options to strategic business case at an additional cost, requiring a simple majority (8 out of 14 Leaders) to progress as part of the jointly funded work. Votes were then held on Options 1a, 4c, 4d and 5a however they did not attract a majority and as such were not agreed to progress within the jointly-funded work.
- 2.8 Subsequently, Kent County Council (Option 1a), Medway Council (4d) and Dartford and Gravesham Borough Councils (5a) have determined they are willing to self-fund strategic business cases for their specified options. These will progress as part of the joint process with support from the jointly appointed strategic business partner and aligned with collective work around the shared evidence base and overarching governance and timescales. Ultimately, strategic business cases can be submitted by individual councils or groups of councils. Each council will only be able to support one case.
- 2.9 Timescales leading up to 28 November 2025 submission are tight and as

such, a regular rhythm of collaborative governance meetings, milestones and activity in the interim is planned and progressing well. These include:

Steering Group – weekly officer meetings to oversee the activity leading into the strategic business cases and ensure it is delivered to time and on budget with the strategic business partner

Local Authority Chief Executives – to provide a Programme Board role in terms of officer decision-making, oversight, and liaison with Leaders

Kent Council Leaders – meetings at regular intervals and at key decision points to ensure the process is genuinely politically-led and proceeds as per Leaders' collectively agreed approach, ultimately producing what Leaders need to satisfy governance in each of their individual Councils and enable a submission on 28 November 2025.

- 2.10 Each group has strong Senior Kent County Council representation on it.
- 2.11 Drafting work on the strategic business cases is scheduled to be completed by end of October 2025 with first drafts in advance of that, to ensure that aligned governance processes in each individual Council scheduled for November can take place.
- 2.12 Individual Councils will then determine their positions and ultimately which strategic business case they will each support in advance of 28 November 2025.

3. After submission

- 3.1 Following submission, it is likely there will be a period of several months until we receive notice of the Minister's decision on a selected option and geography. Early indications are this will likely be between Spring/Summer 2026.
- 3.2 In the interim, learning from other areas that have been through reorganisation before, it will be important for Councils to collectively prepare for Phases 3 and 4 so that they will be ready to progress the necessary and extensive transition work required to ensure services are safe and legal on day 1 of the new Unitary Council(s).
- 3.3 Therefore, whilst waiting for decision, it is envisaged that Leaders and Chief Executives will work collaboratively and focus on putting in place the arrangements required and to determine any procurement activity they deem necessary for a strategic business partner for Phases 3 and 4.

4. Next steps

- 4.1 This report has aimed to set out the basis of the collaborative approach to LGR in Kent to date, how decisions have been made thus far, and next steps.
- 4.2 The joint work with Kent Council Leaders and the external partner will continue at pace. KCC is integral to this work and is committed to fully taking part in the process utilising the shared evidence base and supporting development of the strategic business cases.
- 4.3 As this joint work continues, further reports and updates will be brought to this committee as and when appropriate.

5. Recommendations

5.1 The Cabinet Committee is asked to:

- (1) 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
 - (2) Note** the commitment to continue to engage with this Committee on the collaborative process as and when appropriate.
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6. Relevant Director:

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8. Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Maps detailing options and associated geographies presented to Kent Council Leaders on 03 September 2025.