From: Amanda Beer, Chief Executive

To: Linden Kemkaran, Leader

Subject: Procurement of a Strategic Partner for Kent and Medway LGR Programme

Decision no: 26/00028

Key Decision: Involves expenditure or savings of maximum £1m

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of report: Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation Cabinet Committee, Thursday 14 May 2026

Future Pathway of report: Leader Decision

Electoral Division: All

Is the decision eligible for call-in? Yes

Summary:

This paper sets out the proposal to procure a strategic partner to support the design and implementation plan of Phases 3 and 4 of the collaborative Kent Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) programme between all 14 Local Authorities in Kent and Medway for LGR. For the Kent LGR Programme, the transition period are Phases:

- Phase 3: Foundational (Decision, July 2026 to Shadow Elections, May 2027)
- Phase 4: Readiness (Shadow Elections, May 2027 to Vesting Day, April 2028)

Subject to appointment, the partner will provide advice, guidance and additional generalist and specialist programme capacity to ensure safe and legal transition of council services to the new Unitary Council(s) is completed by Vesting Day (April 2028).

Recommendation(s):

That the Leader consider the following proposal:

Approve the procurement of a Strategic Partner, with Kent County Council acting as the lead commissioning authority on behalf of the Kent and Medway councils, for securing of relevant specialist advice and resource to facilitate and assist with Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) activity.

Approve that Kent County Council will hold any MHCLG Local Government Reorganisation funding received on behalf of Kent councils, to be used solely for LGR transition and implementation planning activity.

Delegate authority to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Local Government Efficiency and Local Government Reorganisation, and the Section 151 Officer to accept and deploy relevant MHCLG funding intended to support all Councils in Kent and Medway to prepare for and implement Local Government Reorganisation.

Delegate authority to the Chief Executive to take other relevant actions, including but not limited to, negotiating, finalising the terms of and entering into required contracts or other legal agreements, as required to implement the decision.

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1. Introduction

1.1 As set out at the sessions to the Devolution and Local Government Reorganization Cabinet Committee, Kent and Medway councils are continuing to work collaboratively within an agreed governance and programme framework to prepare for implementation, completing MHCLG-required preparatory activities that are decision-agnostic and will enable efficient mobilisation following Ministerial decision. Any option approved would represent one of the largest and most complex local government reorganisation process in England, involving 14 councils serving 1.9 million residents.

1.2 Once the Ministerial decision is announced, councils will need to move immediately into a time-critical implementation planning and mobilisation phase through to Vesting Day in April 2028. This will require the building of significant programme capacity to manage transition across workstreams, including programme management, finance, workforce, systems, and governance.

1.3 The strategic partner therefore will support the programme team to establish and operate framework management arrangements, and work with all 14 councils to coordinate delivery across agreed workstreams alongside councils' staff and existing teams. The strategic partner will also help draw on emerging and national best practice related to LGR, and will provide independent assurance to strengthen governance, effective risk management and overall delivery confidence. There will be a requirement for learning and knowledge transfer, to ensure skills and expertise are transferred to council staff to support new councils design and transformation work.

2. Key Considerations

2.1 It is important to note that the strategic partner will not hold, exercise or assume any decision-making authority. In particular, the strategic partner will have no role in relation to statutory functions, formal governance decisions, employment decisions or financial approvals, nor will it be responsible for implementing service changes arising from this work; responsibility for implementation will remain a matter for the relevant authority.

2.2 Consistent with Phases 1 and 2[1] and previous Committee reports, all 14 councils have determined that a strategic partner is required to support Phases

[1] **Phase 1:** Options Appraisal for Shortlisting Geographies (August 2025 – September 2025).
Phase 2: Strategic Business Case(s) Development (September 2025 – November 2025)

3 and 4, from Ministerial decision to Vesting Day April 2028. They have asked Kent County Council to once again act as lead commissioning authority to procure the partner on behalf of all 14 councils. This approach provides a flexible and scalable means of securing specialist expertise and additional capacity aligned to the agreed programme structure.

2.3 A robust procurement exercise has been designed by the KCC Procurement Team building on learning from Phases 1 and 2, to ensure that whilst there is urgency in appointing a partner by Ministerial decision, rigorous process is followed with sufficient time for moderation, evaluation and decision, overseen by a panel made up of Chief Executives and senior Directors from across Kent and Medway.

3. Background

3.1 In February 2025, the then Minister for Local Government invited Kent and Medway councils to submit proposals for local government reorganisation, with councils initially providing a joint interim submission in March 2025 and later being required to submit final business cases by 28 November 2025.

3.2 All 14 councils across Kent and Medway worked collaboratively throughout the process, sharing a single strategic partner for Phases 1 and 2 to submission, and adopting a unified approach to options appraisal, evidence gathering, financial analysis, communications, and programme governance, in line with Government direction. This collective approach ensured an efficient and coordinated process, culminating in the submission of five final business cases by council Leaders on 28 November 2025.

3.3 A Ministerial decision is expected by 16 July 2026. The Minister will decide whether to implement any of the submitted proposals, and with or without modification, based on the criteria, consultation responses, and other relevant information, with final agreement made collectively across Government. Until then, councils will continue preparatory work as tasked by MHCLG.

4. Options considered and dismissed, and associated risk

4.1 Reliance on internal capacity alone was considered but ultimately discounted, as councils do not have sufficient specialist expertise or capacity to undertake implementation planning, mobilisation and preparatory work at the required scale and pace without unacceptable risk to core service delivery. The strategic partner will therefore provide necessary generalist and specialist capacity to underpin the programme management office to successfully manage the complexity of transition and readiness activity whilst ensuring the councils can also maintain business-as-usual services.

5. How the proposed decision supports the Council’s Strategic Statement

5.1 This decision directly aligns with Reforming Kent objective 4 priorities and commitments:

- We will continue to push Government to ensure that residents interests are at the heart of LGR and that the resident voice is embedded in our proposals through local networks.
- Engage with all Kent and Medway councils transparently and respectfully throughout the LGR process, even where we disagree on LGR proposals, so all partners act in the best interests of Kent and Medway residents.
- Ensure that continuity of service provision and service quality is not put at risk by any LGR proposals, either through the development of LGR proposals, or through the implementation of any changes imposed on Kent by the Government

6. Financial Implications

6.1 The total value of the Strategic Partner contract is not yet confirmed. While consultancy and strategic partner services have been procured previously, the scale and volume of work required for a reorganisation of this size, diversity and complexity has not been delivered for a council arrangement of this kind. It is anticipated that the total cost will exceed £1 million and therefore will meet the Key Decision criterion.

6.2 As set out at the March Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation Cabinet Committee, Chief Executives have agreed to an apportionment methodology and an implementation reserve designed by Kent Finance Officers Group for these costs. A Memorandum of Understanding and letters of comfort have been signed by all councils to ensure that pre-implementation costs are managed consistently across all 14 councils with an equitable distribution between them.

6.3 The methodology apportions pre implementation costs up to vesting day and averages cost shares using population and taxbase, as set out below:

- Between Unitary and Two-Tier area 50% by 2024-25 Taxbase and 50% Population Estimate
- In the two-tier area between County and Districts by 80%:20%
- Between Districts and Boroughs 50% by 2024-25 Taxbase and 50% by Population Estimate

6.4 On 16 February 2026, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) announced an additional £63 million nationally to support the next phase of reorganisation. On 25 March 2026, as part of decisions in Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) areas, MHCLG confirmed that this funding would be allocated to areas on a basis of £900,000 per new unitary authority. Depending on the number of new unitaries the Minister establishes in the summer, Kent and Medway are therefore expected to receive between £900,000 and £4.5 million.

6.5 It is therefore not anticipated that additional resource will be required from Kent and Medway Council budgets for financial year 2026/27. However, if no further funding from Government is forthcoming in the interim, remaining pre-vesting day costs will need to be built into council budgets for 2027/28, in line with the agreed apportionment set out in the Memorandum of Understanding.

7. Legal implications

7.1 The proposed decision is only related to procurement, therefore there are no legal implications. Relevant and the required legal advice will be sought as part of the procurement governance process, including of key documents, specification, evaluation criteria and the contract.

8. Equalities implications

8.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken for this decision (Appendix B). It is anticipated that the procurement of a strategic partner to support LGR will not result in any negative impact on people with protected characteristics, as the proposed decision relates solely to the commissioning of specialist support and does not directly change policies or service delivery arrangements. Equality considerations will continue to be embedded throughout LGR as the programme progresses

9. Data Protection Implications

9.1 There are no data protection implications for Kent County Council or other local authorities in Kent and Medway associated with the procurement of strategic partner for LGR. Any DPIAs will be developed to support the implementation of LGR if required at any point during the programme.

10. Other corporate implications

10.1 There are no corporate implications.

11. Governance

11.1 This key decision seeks to authorise the procurement of a strategic partner to provide specialist external support for the LGR programme across Kent and Medway. It confirms Kent County Council as the lead commissioning authority, responsible for running the procurement and managing the contract on behalf of all 14 councils.

11.2 The decision also establishes governance arrangements for the receipt and management of Government LGR funding, allowing Kent County Council to administer funding on behalf of the 14 councils for LGR purposes only. It proposes authority is delegated to the Chief Executive to progress and conclude the procurement and oversee the use of funding in line with agreed controls, with appropriate Member oversight retained if costs change.

11.3 The key decision does not determine the outcome of the government’s decision on LGR, nor does it approve or commit to specific implementation proposals such as service changes, staffing structures, budgets, asset transfers or organisational design. All transition and implementation decisions will be subject to further reports and future Member decisions, and the decision does not commit spending from the council’s 2026/27 budget.

12. Conclusions

12.1 The decision to procure a strategic partner represents a proportionate and timely response to the scale and complexity of LGR across Kent and Medway. It will provide essential additional capacity, specialist expertise and independent assurance to support safe and legal and well-governed transition to new Unitary Council(s), while ensuring councils can maintain business-as-usual services.

12.2 The proposal builds on established collaborative arrangement and maximises the effective use of available government funding, putting Kent and Medway in the strongest possible position to deliver successful transition following the Ministerial decision in July 2026.

Recommendation(s):

That the Leader consider the following proposal:

Approve the procurement of a Strategic Partner, with Kent County Council acting as the lead commissioning authority on behalf of the Kent and Medway councils, for securing of relevant specialist advice and resource to facilitate and assist with Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) activity.

Approve that Kent County Council will hold any MHCLG Local Government Reorganisation funding received on behalf of Kent councils, to be used solely for LGR transition and implementation planning activity.

Delegate authority to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Local Government Efficiency and Local Government Reorganisation, and the Section 151 Officer to accept and deploy relevant MHCLG funding intended to support all Councils in Kent and Medway to prepare for and implement Local Government Reorganisation.

Delegate authority to the Chief Executive to take other relevant actions, including but not limited to, negotiating, finalising the terms of and entering into required contracts or other legal agreements, as required to implement the decision.

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10. Background Documents

Procurement of a Strategic Partner for Kent and Medway LGR Programme, Devolution and Local Government Organisation Cabinet Committee, 14 May 2026

11. Appendices

Appendix A – Proposed Record of Decision Strategic Partner for LGR
Appendix B – EQIA Strategic Partner for LGR

12. Contact details

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