

From: Linden Kemkaran, Leader
Amanda Beer, Chief Executive

To: **Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation Cabinet Committee, 08 September 2026**

Subject: **Update on the Kent and Medway LGR Programme**

Classification: **Unrestricted**

Summary:

This paper provides an update on the Kent and Medway Local Government Reorganisation Programme following the Government's decision on 16 July 2026 to proceed with Option 4B and establish four new unitary authorities across Kent and Medway. It summarises key national developments, progress made locally since the previous Committee update, the emerging programme governance and delivery arrangements, the expected Structural Changes Order timetable, including the proposed arrangements for voluntary and formal Joint Committees, and the next steps ahead of Vesting Day, 1 April 2028.

Recommendations

The Cabinet Committee is asked to:

1) Note and comment on the progress and next steps of the Kent and Medway LGR Programme.

1. Introduction

1.1 This paper provides an update on national Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) developments since the previous Cabinet Committee on 14 May 2026. This covers:

- National Developments Update
- Kent and Medway Programme Update:
 - Programme Structure
 - Programme Team and Strategic Partner
 - Finance
- Structural Changes Order Timeline
- Voluntary and Formal Joint Committees

2. National Developments Update

2.1 Since the last Cabinet Committee meeting on 14 May 2026, there has been a change in the ministerial team at the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) following the change of Prime Minister in July 2026. However, national policy direction remains clear, with the Government

continuing to identify Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) as a major part of its reform programme.

- 2.2 This continued policy commitment was demonstrated by Ministers progressing decisions on LGR proposals across the country in line with the national timetable. On 16 July 2026, the Government announced decisions for 13 of the 14 Tranche 3 areas, including its decision to proceed with Option 4B for Kent and Medway, which will establish four new unitary councils. The Government has confirmed that further consideration is continuing in respect of West Sussex, and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, with additional correspondence and consultation activity undertaken in those areas.
- 2.3 MHCLG is also in the process of arranging 'LGR Kick-off' meetings with all areas, to update Leaders and Chief Executives on the next stages of the process and the Structural Changes Order (SCO), with Kent and Medway's taking place in September. We are also awaiting the development of a national assurance framework to support consistent oversight of programme readiness, risk and delivery across different government departments.
- 2.4 Taken together, the national position indicates continuity in policy intent despite ministerial changes, with increasing emphasis now being placed on implementation, assurance and transition and legislation through the SCO. For Kent and Medway, this reinforces the importance of maintaining momentum locally, aligning programme governance with emerging national policy, and ensuring that the programme is sufficiently developed to respond to MHCLG assurance requirements as they are confirmed.

3. Programme Update

- 3.1 Following the Ministerial decision in July 2026, the Kent and Medway LGR programme has moved from the Enhanced Discovery Phase into the Foundational Phase of implementation. As set out at the March Cabinet Committee, the Enhanced Discovery Phase enabled councils to undertake MHCLG preparatory activities, to develop a shared evidence base and progress priority areas of work ahead of the Government's decision. The focus of the programme has now shifted to mobilisation, implementation planning and delivery assurance, with a clear emphasis on achieving safe and legal transition on Vesting Day, 1 April 2028, for all four new unitary councils.
- 3.2 A programme structure has been developed by the Programme Director and Chief Executives to provide the governance, capacity and delivery arrangements required for the transition period. The structure draws on experience and lessons of areas that have previously undergone LGR and is designed to reflect the scale and complexity of reorganisation across Kent and Medway and combines democratic oversight, strategic officer leadership, dedicated programme management capacity, service-led delivery and external specialist strategic partner support.

- 3.3 Democratic oversight of the programme will operate through a combination of countywide and individual local authority arrangements. Voluntary Joint Committees are expected to provide early political oversight within each future unitary geography ahead of the formal statutory Joint Committees being established following the SCO coming into force, which is covered later in this report. Formal decision-making will remain with the existing councils, in accordance with their own constitutions and decision-making processes, until such time as statutory responsibilities transfer to the Shadow Authorities under the SCO.
- 3.4 Officer oversight will be provided through the Kent and Medway LGR Programme Board, whose membership will consist of the Senior Responsible Officer (SRO), Deputy Senior Responsible Officer (DSRO), Place Leads (Chief Executive / Senior Officer appointed to each new unitary area) Chief Executives, the Programme Director and relevant statutory representatives.
- 3.5 The primary delivery mechanisms for the programme will be the Theme Boards and Workstreams. Theme Boards will oversee the development of future service blueprints and Day 1 operating models, supported by specialist workstreams. The agreed Theme Boards will cover Adults, Children's, Environment and Place, Communities, Finance, Assets and Procurement, People, Governance and Democracy, and Digital, Data, Technology and ICT.
- 3.6 Workstreams have been identified beneath each Theme Board, which will undertake the detailed delivery activity, bringing together subject matter experts and senior officers to support transition. Workstreams will draw on the outputs from the Enhanced Discovery Phase, including Kent County Council's Service Complexity Assessments, Medway Service Workbooks, District Service Executive Summaries and Priority Activity Group outputs, to develop high-level service blueprints for Day 1 readiness. The mobilisation of Theme Boards and Workstreams is expected to take place over September.

Programme Team and Strategic Partner

- 3.7 The programme will be resourced through a hybrid model, combining the dedicated Kent and Medway LGR Programme Team, input from existing council staff and specialist strategic partner support. This approach is intended to provide the capacity and expertise needed to support delivery at pace, while ensuring that Theme Boards and Workstreams are informed by the knowledge and experience of officers from across all 14 councils.
- 3.8 The foundation Kent and Medway LGR Programme Team has now been established and is scaling up during August and September 2026. Senior Programme Managers, Senior Policy Managers and Programme and Project Officers have been recruited to provide dedicated capacity on behalf of all 14 current councils. The Programme Team, led by the Programme Director, will be responsible for maintaining programme oversight, coordinating activity across Theme Boards and workstreams, supporting evidence-based decision-making, and manage programme risks and dependencies.

- 3.9 As presented to the May Cabinet Committee, the programme is also being supported through the appointment of a Strategic Partner to provide specialist programme and delivery expertise through the next phases of implementation. The Strategic Partner role is intended to complement, rather than replace, council officer expertise by supporting programme planning, critical path analysis, assurance, service blueprinting, delivery support and readiness activity up until Vesting Day.

Finance

- 3.10 As set out at the March Cabinet Committee, Chief Executives have agreed to establish an LGR implementation reserve supported by an apportionment methodology developed by Kent Finance Officers Group (KFOG) for these costs. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and letters of comfort have been signed by all Chief Executives to ensure that pre-implementation costs are managed consistently across all 14 councils with an equitable distribution between them.
- 3.11 On 16 July 2026, as part of the decisions for Tranche 3 areas, MHCLG confirmed that funding would be allocated to areas on a basis of £900,000 per new unitary authority. Kent and Medway will therefore receive £3.6 million for the financial year 2026/27. It is not anticipated that additional resource will be required from Kent and Medway Council budgets for 2026/27 financial year. Kent County Council will hold the programme funds on behalf of all 14 councils in accordance with the agreed MoU and supporting letters of comfort.
- 3.12 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. The expected 2026/27 and 2027/28 programme expenditure profile will continue to be refined as the Strategic Partner support and programme requirements are confirmed. Arrangements for 2027/28 funding will need to be progressed through each authority's normal decision-making route, including budget-setting or specific key decisions where required.

4. Structural Changes Order

- 4.1 The Structural Changes Order (SCO) is the statutory instrument through which the Government gives legal effect to LGR. For Kent and Medway, the SCO will codify the Minister's decision to establish four new unitary authorities, provide for the transition and implementation arrangements, and set out the legal framework for the new authorities to be created, including arrangements for shadow authority elections, governance, and implementation leadership.
- 4.2 Following the Ministerial decision on 16 July 2026, MHCLG wrote to Kent and Medway on 20 July setting out the implementation arrangements that are expected to be included in the SCO. This included Joint Committee membership numbers, confirmation that Amanda Beer would be the Senior Responsible Officer for the Kent and Medway LGR Programme, and a further request for information to support drafting of the order. This included

confirmation of Returning Officers for the first elections to the shadow authorities, proposed warding arrangements for those elections, and proposals for the alignment of parish council elections with elections to the new unitary authorities. A single joint response was submitted to MHCLG on 17 August 2026, which provided all this information.

- 4.3 Alongside the 17 August response, Kent and Medway Chief Executives wrote to MHCLG requesting an amendment to the proposed Deputy Implementation Team Leader arrangements for North Kent. The letter explained that Leaders and Chief Executives had already reached a unanimous position that the programme should have a programme-wide Deputy Senior Responsible Officer, that Richard Hicks, Chief Executive of Medway Council, should fulfil that role, and that Place Leads for all four future unitary areas should be appointed through the locally agreed process rather than by specifying a particular postholder for North Kent. The letter emphasised the importance of preserving the locally agreed leadership arrangements and maintaining collective ownership across all councils during implementation. Confirmation from MHCLG on this proposed amendment is currently awaited.
- 4.4 Subject to MHCLG's drafting process, it is expected that the draft SCO will be shared with Kent and Medway in the autumn for fact checking and comment before progressing through legal checks and pre-legislative scrutiny. The current working assumption is that the SCO will be laid before Parliament before the parliamentary recess in December 2026. The parliamentary process expected to conclude in March 2027, after which the Order would come into force. This timetable remains critical, as it provides the legal foundation for the establishment of shadow authorities, the first elections in May 2027, and the transition to the new unitary authorities ahead of vesting day on 1 April 2028.

5. Voluntary and Formal Joint Committees

- 5.1 Joint Committees will be an important element of the democratic oversight arrangements during the transition to the four new unitary authorities. Their role will be to provide strategic and political oversight of the preparations for reorganisation within each future unitary geography, while operating as part of the single Kent and Medway LGR programme. Joint Committees are intended to support a safe and legal transition, maintain transparency through public meetings, and provide a structured route for member oversight ahead of the establishment of the Shadow Authorities.
- 5.2 Joint Committees will be required to meet within 14 days following the SCO comes into force. Therefore, it is recommended by MHCLG that voluntary arrangements are put in place ahead of the formal statutory Joint Committees. The purpose of the voluntary phase is to provide an early route for political oversight, enable preparatory work to begin, and ensure that the formal statutory Joint Committees are ready to operate effectively within the limited period between the SCO coming into force and the first Shadow Authority meetings following the May 2027 elections.

- 5.3 The voluntary Joint Committees are expected to mirror the formal Joint Committee arrangements, including membership, terms of reference, procedure rules, meeting frequency and work programme. This approach is intended to avoid a significant change in operating model when the SCO comes into force and to provide consistency across all four future unitary geographies. Councils are currently expected to take the necessary local decisions during September and early October, enabling the first voluntary Joint Committee meetings to take place in October 2026, where local governance timetables allow.
- 5.4 A standard suite of documents has been developed to support this process, including a common Terms of Reference and common Rules of Procedure. These documents are intended to be applied consistently across the four Joint Committees to avoid unnecessary variation in approach. Each council will, however, need to follow its own constitutional and decision-making requirements for establishing the voluntary arrangements and appointing its representatives.
- 5.5 The Joint Committees' priority work programme is expected to include oversight of transition planning, preparatory work for interim statutory officer appointments, the development of draft Shadow Authority constitutions and schemes of delegation, members' allowances, codes of conduct, Shadow Authority meeting schedules and support for Returning Officers in convening the first Shadow Authority meetings. These matters reflect the statutory and practical tasks that need to be completed before Shadow Authorities are able to take on formal responsibility following the May 2027 elections.

6. Next Steps and Timeline

- 6.1 The next phase of the Kent and Medway LGR Programme will move from mobilisation into structured implementation and transition delivery. During September and October 2026, the Programme Team will continue to scale up, with further programme management capacity brought into place to support coordination across the programme. Theme Boards and Workstreams will also be mobilised, with initial activity focused on confirming membership, agreeing priorities and ways of working, identifying key dependencies, and beginning the development of high-level service blueprints.
- 6.2 In parallel, work will continue with MHCLG on the development of the SCO and associated implementation arrangements. The immediate priorities will be to establish voluntary Joint Committees within each of the four future unitary geographies, progress the local decisions required to support those arrangements, and ensure that the programme is ready to respond to the draft SCO when it is shared for fact checking and comment. These actions support continued momentum, strengthen democratic oversight and help keep the programme aligned with the expected statutory timetable through to Shadow Authority elections in May 2027 and Vesting Day on 1 April 2028.

Recommendations

The Cabinet Committee is asked to:

1) Note and comment on the progress and next steps of the Kent and Medway LGR Programme.

Relevant Director:

Tim Woolmer, Programme Director, Kent and Medway LGR Programme –
Tim.Woolmer@kent.gov.uk

Report Authors:

Matt Mottram, Senior Policy Manager, Kent and Medway LGR Programme –
Matthew.Mottram@kent.gov.uk

Background documents:

Previous papers to the Devolution and LGR Cabinet Committee, available at:

May 2026:

<https://democracy.kent.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=979&MId=9849&Ver=4>

March 2026:

<https://democracy.kent.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=979&MId=9848&Ver=4>