

Update on Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution in Kent

Members are aware that the Government has rejected Kent and Medway's request to be part of the priority programme for devolution. This decision was a significant disappointment for many, as a Kent Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) would have enabled greater local decision-making, empowering communities and enhancing public service delivery.

However, the Government has signalled that further devolution opportunities may arise, although no definitive timetable has been provided. Kent's leadership will continue advocating for the alignment of devolution proposals with the implementation of new unitaries, ensuring a coherent and strategic transition for residents.

Government Directive on Local Government Reorganisation

Following this decision, on 5th February 2025, all councils in Kent received a letter from the Minister for Local Government, Jim McMahon. This letter, which has been previously circulated and is available on the Government website ([here](#)), invites Kent Leaders to develop a proposal for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) by 28th November 2025.

Unlike the previous devolution bid, this initiative specifically seeks to restructure local government to ensure more efficient and high-quality public services. The Government has not mandated a fixed model, allowing flexibility for local authorities to determine the most effective structure. However, they expect Kent's councils to collaborate on a shared vision for local government reform.

Initial Timelines and Process

- **21st March 2025** - Submission of a high-level interim plan, following the guidance set out in the Minister's letter. We would expect this to reflect the early indications that:
 - The larger geography is the historic boundary of Kent defined by the existing County and District councils
 - A single or two unitary solution is not an option
 - The likely number of Unitary Councils within the larger geography will be 3 or 4
- **22nd March 2025 – 27th November 2025**
 - **Appointment of a Strategic Partner to evaluate the disaggregation of Kent and Medway** (assessing costs, functions, assets, and resource distribution)
 - **Engagement with councils & stakeholders** to explore options.
 - **Financial & governance modelling** for different unitary structures.
 - **Political discussions** with councillors, MPs, and government.
 - **Public consultation & feedback collection.**
 - **Finalisation of the business case & proposal**
- **28th November 2025 - Submission** of the full proposal to the **Secretary of State** for Local Government.
- **Early 2028** - Expected implementation of the new Unitary Authorities, subject to Government approval.

Structural Considerations and Challenges

One of the key questions is how Kent's local government should be structured. Government indicate a preference for unitary councils serving a population of at least 500,000, (although,

Ministers have been clear that exceptions could be considered if justified by financial and service stability). With a current Kent and Medway population of approximately 1.9 million, early discussions suggest the possibility of three or four unitary councils.

However, **no firm decisions have been made on geographical boundaries, so the interim submission does not intend to suggest these.**

The Government has indicated that boundary changes should not be a focus, as these could delay the transition to unitary councils, so it is expected that the existing district boundaries will be used as the building blocks to form the new authorities. Further analysis is required before any recommendations are proposed.

Role of Kent Leaders and Collaborative Work

The complexity and significance of this process requires ongoing coordination among Kent Leaders and Chief Executives, supported by Policy Officers.

As part of the regular monthly collaborative work that takes place across Kent, items to discuss Devolution and LGR have featured as part of the agenda and work has already begun on preparing the interim submission while simultaneously developing the brief for appointing a Strategic Partner to guide the full proposal development.

Additionally, engagement with residents and other key stakeholders will be a critical part of this process, ensuring communities are informed and involved in shaping the future of local government in Kent.

Next Steps and Member Involvement

It is legally a matter for Cabinet to consider and approve any action in relation to the interim plan. This will be on the agenda for 20th March 2025, however, our intention is to schedule an Extraordinary Council meeting for 6pm on the same day, allowing all members the opportunity to debate the item and any proposed options to inform the Cabinet decision. A formal notification for this meeting will be circulated.

To date, members have been briefed through written updates, an in-person briefing and a roundtable discussion with the Leader. Staff have received similar updates. Following the 21st March submission, further staff and public briefings will be scheduled to maintain transparency and engagement throughout the process.

Conclusion

The Government has clearly set out their aspirations and as we move forward towards the 28th of November we could see the beginning of a transformative transition for local government in Kent. While the timetable is ambitious and opinions may differ on the best approach, the overarching objective is clear: to create cost-effective, resilient, and high-quality public services that will serve Kent's communities for generations to come.

As we progress, we will continue to draw lessons from successful unitary transitions across the country and work collaboratively to develop the best possible model for our region.

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Distribution:

All ABC elected members, KCC Ashford members, Directors/MT & MPs only.

In addition, this will also be shared with Parish, Town and Community Councils.