

EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL	
Meeting Date	19 March 2025
Report Title	English Devolution White Paper
EMT Lead	Larissa Reed – Chief Executive
Head of Service	Larissa Reed – Chief Executive
Lead Officer	Larissa Reed – Chief Executive
Classification	Open
Recommendations	<p>That Council:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Notes the invitation received from the Minister for Local Government to work with other councils in Kent to submit a proposal for local government reorganisation. 2. Notes the contents of the draft interim plan that has been drafted in response to the invitation. 3. Agree not to sign up to any geographies or financial information at the current time. 4. Notes that a cross-party working group has been established to oversee discussions on this issue (and associated issues on devolution). 5. Delegates authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Group Leaders to agree and submit the final proposal on 21 March 2025.

1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to set out and explain the contents of the English Devolution White Paper and the invitation from Government to submit a proposal for local Government Reorganisation.

2 Background

- 2.1 On 16 December 2024 the Government published the '*English Devolution White Paper - Power and partnerships: Foundations for growth*' which made clear their intent to deliver both devolution and local government reorganisation. A report was taken to an Extraordinary Full Council on 4 February 2025 to outline the contents of the White Paper and the possible implications for the Council and the

Borough. A number of all-councillor briefings (written and verbal) have also been provided on the issue.

- 2.2 Following the publication of the White Paper, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution, Jim McMahon OBE MP, wrote to council leaders inviting them to submit bids to be included in a 'Devolution Priority Programme (DPP)'. Kent and Medway councils submitted a bid to be included in the DPP to deliver mayoral devolution at pace. On 5 February 2025 we received notification that Kent had not been selected to be part of the DPP but we also received an invitation to submit a bid for Local Government Reorganisation. The letter stated "*I am writing to you to formally invite you to work with other council leaders in your area to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation, and to set out further detail on the criteria, guidance for the development of proposals, and the timeline for this process ... We ask for an interim plan to be submitted on or before 21 March 2025 ... I will expect any full proposal to be submitted by 28 November*".
- 2.3 The Government has stated that it expects local leaders to work collaboratively and proactively to produce robust and sustainable unitary proposals that are in the best interests of the whole area.
- 2.4 A copy of the letter is attached at Appendix A which sets out the criteria the government will be assessing reorganisation bids against and also a set of points that they expect interim plans (to be submitted by 21 March 2025) to address.
- 2.5 A draft county-wide response and covering letter has been put together which is attached at Appendices B and C . The response has been put together in a very short period of time and is subject to ongoing discussions between council leaders so may change between now and the date of submission. Additional supporting information and data is included in appendix D and council can include them in the final submission. Due to the fact that council has not had sufficient time to scrutinize and consider these appendices, it is not recommended that these are included.
- 2.6 Work is ongoing to establish one or more possible geographies (as set out in Appendix D) but, as the response makes clear, there is no consensus amongst Kent Council Leaders that there should be either three or four unitary councils within the county. The criteria set out by government and additional information provided in briefings to councillors and officers is that new unitary councils are expected to cover geographies of at least 500,000 people and to be made up of existing council boundaries. The views of partners are being sought and, following the interim submission, work will be undertaken to evaluate a number of specific proposals for unitary geographies.

2.7 The Government has made clear that it does not expect to make any decisions on unitarisation on the basis of the March submission and they have indicated that they will provide support to areas working up full proposals by the 28 November 2025 deadline. Accordingly, it is expected that Kent councils will procure one or more external partners to support them in this process and to ensure that options and the submission are independently evaluated. An informal cross-party working group of Leaders was established in January 2025, and they will continue to be appraised of progress and to provide oversight of both future Kent-wide submissions and of local associated work (including any work on a Community Governance review).

3.1 Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

3.2 Option 1 – that SBC does not put in a proposal on March 21 2025. This is not recommended as not being part of the process will limit any influence Swale Borough Council may have in the outcome of the process.

3.3 Option 2 – That SBC supports the full submission including appendices. This is not recommended due to the lack of time and scrutiny of the contents of the appendices, and the fact the not all Kent Councils have agreed to the contents of the appendices.

4. Consultation Undertaken or Proposed

4.1 Presentations have been given at each of the Area Committees, Local Council Liaison Forum, KALC SAC.

4.2 A public meeting was held on 12 March 2025 and key points are in appendix E.

5. Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	The work required to create a new unitary authority is significant and is not currently part of the Corporate Plan. This would need to be reviewed
Financial, Resource and Property	The Government has suggested that there will be funds available to assist with the transition, however we currently do not know the details of this. There will be a significant financial impact on creating a new Unitary Authority.
Legal, Statutory and Procurement	The statutory deadline for the final business case is 28 November 2025. The submission of 21 March 2025 is not legally binding.

Crime and Disorder	There are no direct crime and disorder implications of this proposal
Environment and Climate/Ecological Emergency	There are no direct Environmental Emergency implications of this proposal
Health and Wellbeing	Although there is not direct Health and Wellbeing impact of this decision, there are significant benefits to have a unitary council who is able to link Health and Wellbeing outcomes to other priorities.
Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults	There are no direct safeguarding implications of this proposal
Risk Management and Health and Safety	There are no direct health and safety implications of this proposal
Equality and Diversity	There are no direct Equality and Diversity implications of this proposal
Privacy and Data Protection	There are no direct privacy or data protection implications of this proposal

6. Appendices

- Appendix A: Letter to Kent Council Leaders from MHCLG
- Appendix B: Draft Covering Letter for Draft Kent Wide Submission
- Appendix C: Draft Kent-wide interim submission to MHCLG
- Appendix D: Supplementary Information pack
- Appendix E: Notes from public meeting held on 12 March 2025

7. Background Papers

English Devolution White Paper: [English Devolution White Paper](#)

Kent Devolution Webpage: [Devolution - Kent County Council](#)