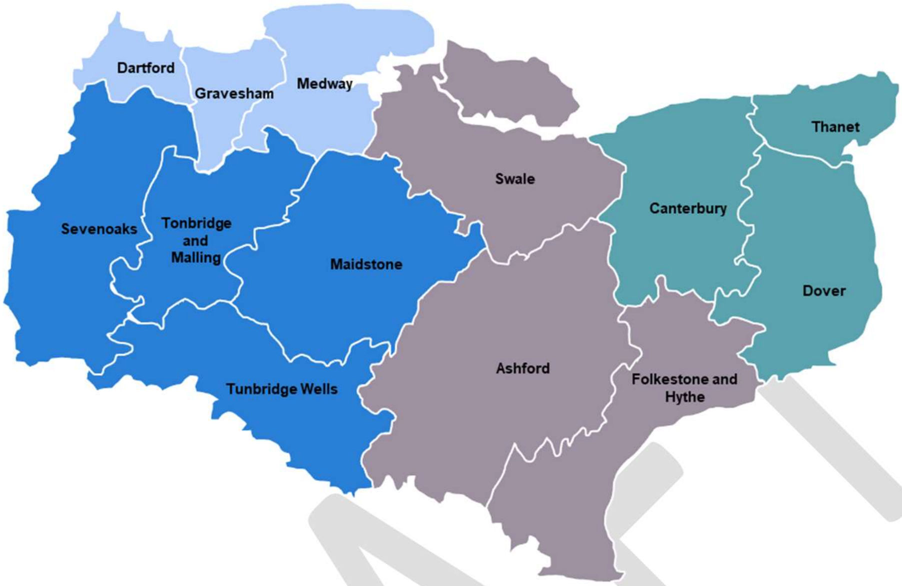
Executive summary

Introducing Option 4B

Supported by the district and borough councils of **[Councils to be inserted],** the Option 4B business case sets out a four-unitary model that balances local identity with strategic capacity.



	North Kent	West Kent	Mid Kent	East Kent
Population	528,337	567,062	411,746	424,559
Current council areas	• Dartford • Gravesham • Medway	• Maidstone • Sevenoaks • Tonbridge & Malling • Tunbridge Wells	• Swale • Ashford • Folkestone & Hythe	• Canterbury • Dover • Thanet
	North Kent is a nationally significant growth area within the Thames Estuary corridor. It hosts major infrastructure assets including the Dartford Crossing, Ebbsfleet International Station, and the planned Lower Thames Crossing, supporting high commuter flows, logistics, and cross-regional connectivity. Key urban centres like Medway (Kent's	West Kent combines a high-quality natural environment with excellent connectivity and a skilled workforce. It is a hub for professional services, life sciences, and creative industries. Districts such as Sevenoaks, Tonbridge & Malling, Tunbridge Wells, and Maidstone offer strong residential markets, high levels of knowledge-based	Mid Kent includes Ashford, Swale, and Folkestone & Hythe, areas combining fast-growing urban centres with rural and coastal assets. Ashford benefits from high-speed rail and international connectivity, while Swale's Port of Sheerness plays a vital logistics role. Folkestone & Hythe leverages its coastal position and Eurotunnel access	East Kent is defined by its international gateways, strong cultural heritage, and growing sectors in health, life sciences, and the creative economy. Canterbury leads as an education and cultural centre, while Dover and Ramsgate support major trade and port activity. Thanet and surrounding coastal towns offer regeneration

	largest urban area), Dartford, and Gravesham are driving growth in housing, commercial development, and sectors such as creative industries, engineering, and higher education. The area is well-positioned for clean growth, benefitting from strong transport infrastructure and strategic proximity to London and Europe.	employment, and vibrant town centres. The area's green infrastructure and heritage assets make it attractive for investment and lifestyle-focused development.	for economic growth. The sub-region is well-suited for infrastructure-led development, renewable energy, and resilience-focused investment.	potential and tourism appeal, supported by lower land values and strategic transport links, including High Speed 1.

Purpose and approach (see section 1)

The reorganisation of local government presents a valuable opportunity to redesign a system that better serves the diverse needs of Kent and Medway's residents.

The 14 councils of Kent have collaborated to develop a model reflecting established population and economic centres as well as community and workplace patterns.

Through this joint effort, the councils have developed five business cases addressing the government's six reform criteria, proposing to replace the current two-tier system with more efficient and resilient unitary authorities.

These authorities aim to support devolution, enhance service delivery and strengthen community engagement.

Each proposal is underpinned by a shared evidence base, robust governance, transparent appraisal and extensive stakeholder and public consultation to form a united and evidence-led vision for the future of local government in Kent and Medway.

	Option 1a	Option 3a	Option 4b	Option 4d	Option 5a
					
Approach to drafting	Kent County Council leading with some shared input around finance and services.	Common approach to drafting with input from councils.			
Structure, formatting and branding	Separate structure, formatting and branding.	Single approach to structure, formatting and branding across four business cases. A significant proportion of content across the four cases will be shared and clearly highlighted within the cases.			

The Kent context (see section 2)

Kent, located in the south east of England, is a geographically diverse and economically important area.

Known as the Garden of England and the UK's Gateway to Europe, it covers 3,739 sq. km with a population of about 1.93 million.

The county combines densely populated urban centres with extensive rural areas.

Its landscape includes the North Downs, The Weald, and a long coastline featuring the White Cliffs of Dover. Rivers like the Thames, Medway and Stour support trade and settlement.

Economically, Kent has evolved from its agricultural roots into a modern, mixed economy encompassing manufacturing, logistics, life sciences, tourism and digital industries.

Major assets include the Port of Dover, the Discovery Park science and technology hub and excellent transport links.

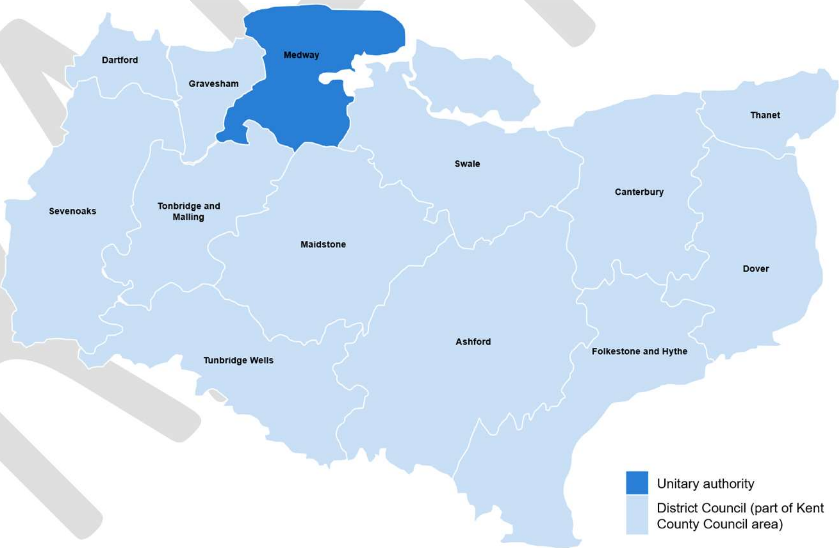
Kent's strategic location, skilled workforce and innovation hubs drive regional growth and support its case for devolution and local government reform.

Kent currently has a two-tier local government system.

At the upper tier is Kent County Council, while the lower tier consists of 12 district and borough councils.

Medway Council functions separately as a unitary authority.

In addition, there are more than 300 town and parish councils handling local-level services.



The current mixed model of service delivery creates complexity and all 14 councils recognise the potential benefits of moving towards a single-tier system with fewer organisations and a more unified governance structure.

Challenges and opportunities (see section 3)

Councils across the county face financial pressures and rising demand.

In Kent, key pressures include:

- uneven funding and tax bases
- escalating social care and border-related costs
- workforce shortages and morale issues
- fragmented governance across the two-tier system

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) offers a unique opportunity to create a more efficient, resilient and sustainable model.

By simplifying structures and pursuing devolution, Kent can streamline service delivery, strengthen financial stability, enhance collaboration across sectors, attract investment and build a greater sense of place to ensure more cohesive, accountable and community focused local government services.

Vision and principles for Local Government Reorganisation (see section 4)

Our vision for local government in Kent is:

Better outcomes for Kent residents through financially-sustainable and accountable local public services delivered in partnership with communities.

LGR is the catalyst for transformation and reform, creating resilient, digitally-enabled councils rooted in local identity and strong partnerships.

It is crucial that devolution and LGR are linked: structural reform unlocks the powers, funding and flexibility needed to make decisions locally and drive growth.

Kent's ambition is to deliver better outcomes for all residents through sustainable, accountable and community-focused public services.

All councils in Kent are united in their support for devolving powers to a single strategic authority.

This will ensure decisions about Kent are made in Kent, by those who know its communities best.

LGR and devolution are intrinsically linked. To fully realise our vision, we need the powers, funding and countywide collaboration that only a devolution deal and a new strategic Kent authority can provide.

We are committed to securing a devolution deal for Kent at the earliest possible opportunity.

Option 4B offers a future-ready model for Kent's local government, one that combines the scale needed to deliver efficient, resilient services with a deep respect for local identity, community voice and historical continuity.

By creating four strategically-aligned unitary authorities, Option 4B enables transformation across public services, supports financial sustainability through coherent economic geographies and tax bases and unlocks opportunities for Kent-wide collaboration where it adds value.

It reflects the shared ambition of Kent's leaders to build a system that is inclusive, place-sensitive, and capable of delivering better outcomes for residents, while positioning the county to secure devolution powers and drive long-term growth.

The case for Option 4B (see section 5)

Option 4B offers a balanced and locally-responsive model for the future of local government in Kent.
By creating four unitary authorities, this approach ensures structures are:

- large enough to deliver efficient, high-quality public services at scale
- small enough to preserve local identity, reflect historic and cultural geographies, and maintain close connections with the communities they serve

This model is rooted in Kent's economic and demographic realities.

It supports long-term financial sustainability by creating authorities with balanced GVA and tax bases, while enabling strategic collaboration across the county to address shared challenges and unlock future growth.

Key strengths include:

- its alignment with government guidelines by ensuring no single authority is disproportionately large, avoiding scenarios where one unit is nearly double the size of another
- it accommodates planned and projected population growth across the region, with each new authority expected to exceed 500,000 residents during the lifetime of their Local Plans
- it ensures a fair distribution of key economic indicators such as GVA and levels of deprivation, fostering the conditions for sustained economic development in all four authorities
- supports councillor-to-electorate ratios within accepted ranges, enabling strong local governance and effective democratic representation in each area

Summarised below are the key arguments for why the four-unitary model is best for Kent.

Key theme	Arguments	Government Criteria
Economic viability and balanced growth	• Four councils have balanced economic strength, tax bases, and Gross Value Added (GVA) per capita, supporting sustainable growth and resilience. • Each unitary has a recognised economic centre and international ports/airports, providing gateways to trade and economic growth. • Business rates tax bases strong (£70m–£113m retained), enabling financial independence. • Localised economic strategies possible while aligning with wider Kent ambitions. • Council tax bases are sufficient and differences modest, reducing disruption and complexity. • Alignment with Travel to Work Areas supports coherent economic geographies for housing, infrastructure, and labour markets.	Criteria 1, 2, 5
Balanced population and service delivery	• Balanced population sizes (411k–567k) enable economies of scale and resilience in service delivery. • Population densities vary logically (urban vs rural), allowing tailored service priorities (eg, urban regeneration vs green infrastructure). • Balanced deprivation and social care caseloads promote equitable service distribution.	Criteria 1, 2, 3, 6

	• Model supports localised reform while maintaining efficiency and scale. • Existing partnerships and shared services enhance capacity and reduce fragmentation. • Councillor-to-electorate ratios manageable, with structural/community engagement measures proposed.	
Financial resilience and efficiency	• Healthy financial metrics with balanced reserves, manageable transition costs (£130.9m implementation, payback 10+ years). • Economies of scale in procurement, staffing, IT, HR, and infrastructure reduce duplication. • Simplified governance improves financial oversight and transparency, reducing risk of inefficiency. • Transformation and digital investment enabled by scale and capacity. • Avoids boundary changes, limiting disruption and extra costs. • Invest-to-save principles and joint transition planning minimise financial burden. • Scale supports resilience to absorb shocks in high-pressure services.	Criteria 2, 3, 5
Local identity and community cohesion	• Boundaries align with historic, cultural, and service geographies, preserving local identity and social cohesion. • Recognisable community ties maintained (e.g., coastal towns, market towns). • Supports continuation of local traditions, civic institutions, and community networks. • Collaboration across boundaries remains possible for strategic issues. • Each unitary has a clear identity aligned with Travel to Work Areas and education boundaries.	Criteria 1, 4, 6
Governance and democratic accountability	• Four councils create a more efficient democratic model, reducing duplication and simplifying decision-making. • Balanced councillor-to-elector ratios enable strong local representation and manageable workloads. • Structural/community engagement measures (parish councils, committees) enhance neighbourhood involvement. • The model supports place-sensitive governance balancing local responsiveness with regional coordination. • Clear leadership and governance frameworks strengthen transparency and accountability.	Criteria 1, 5, 6
Strategic devolution and regional priorities	• Four unitary authorities with proportionate population sizes support equitable representation and strong regional partnerships. • Streamlined governance better positioned for engagement with central government and regional bodies. • Aligns with functional economic areas and transport corridors enhancing coordination. • Supports Kent-wide strategic planning (housing, infrastructure, economic development).	Criteria 5

	• Collective commitment across councils strengthens the governance case for devolution. • Balances opportunity and risk across authorities, ensuring no one authority is overburdened.	
Transformation and innovation	• Scale and capacity to deliver complex reforms in social care and invest in digital/data-driven services. • Supports integrated service delivery and breaks down silos. • Builds on existing footprints, minimising disruption and fostering collaboration with NHS, Police, and other partners. • Enables flexible, agile responses to emerging challenges. • Shared transition planning accelerates quick wins and coordinated transformation. • Supports joint approaches to prevention and integrated care.	Criteria 2, 3, 6

Implementation plan (see section 6)

Kent's LGR implementation plan aims to follow a phased and collaborative approach across all councils, leveraging a well-established shared programme with strong governance and joint planning.

The process is structured into preparation, foundational, shadow authority, officer leadership and go-live phases, each with clear priorities to ensure a smooth transition while driving ambitious public service reform alongside devolution.

The programme builds on Kent's history of joint working and lessons from previous LGR efforts, supported by targeted governance, workstreams and stakeholder engagement to mitigate risks related to service disaggregation, aggregation, ICT and working together, aiming for a seamless, efficient transition that benefits residents and public services over the long-term.

Options appraisal (see Appendix 1)

A rigorous and collaborative process undertaken by the 14 Kent local authorities to appraise potential council governance options. The aim was to provide a robust, consistent, and evidence-based foundation to support local decision-making on which options should advance to full business case development.

The appraisal followed national guidance and was aligned with the Government's six criteria for local government reorganisation, as set out in correspondence from the Secretary of State in February and June 2025. Importantly, the process did not rank or recommend any preferred option but provided a shared evidence base to inform council decisions.

Key stages of the appraisal process:

Selection of options
A longlist of ten potential unitary options was developed based on past work, stakeholder input, and strategic discussions.

After joint engagement, three options were removed from consideration, resulting in a shortlist of seven options for detailed appraisal.

Data collection and modelling
Comprehensive datasets were compiled from public sources and council submissions.

For options involving boundary changes, additional modelling (e.g. using LSOA-level data) ensured accuracy and comparability across new configurations.

Development of evaluation criteria
Fourteen criteria were developed in line with the Government's six LGR tests.

Each criterion included specific metrics and clear definitions of "what good looks like" to enable consistent evaluation across options.

Scoring methodology
A standard three-point scale (High, Medium, Low) was applied to each metric, primarily based on balance across proposed authorities.

No weighting was applied; all criteria were treated equally.

Where appropriate, nuanced scoring (e.g. Medium/High) or bespoke approaches were used for single-unitary scenarios.

Assessment and presentation of results
Each option was scored across all metrics, and results were summarised through visual dashboards and narrative commentary.

Special consideration was given to ensure comparability for unique configurations, such as a single-county unitary authority.

Council Leaders reviewed the appraisal findings, supported by resident and stakeholder views. While the appraisal did not determine a preferred option, it served as an objective and structured basis for informed political judgement and democratic decision-making on which options should proceed to business case development.

Financial modelling (see Appendix 2)

Finance officers across all 14 Kent councils have reviewed and adjusted the financial modelling in order to provide a single financial assessment of models for inclusion in proposals to government.

The key driver of difference between options are the number of councils being proposed.

Due to the assumptions applied within the modelling, implementation costs and recurring costs of disaggregation increase as the number of councils proposed increases.

The headline numbers for Option 4B are set out below:

Option	Implementation costs (one-off) (£m)	Reorganisation savings (gross) (£m)	Disaggregation costs (£m)*	Recurring annual revenue savings (£m)**	Estimated payback period
4b	(130.9)	67.5	(32.9) - (48.6)	18.9 – 34.6	7.8 – 14.3 years

Data sources (see Appendix 3)

A common data set was used for all analyses presented in this case.

Details of the data set including its source, structure and variables, are provided in Appendix 3.