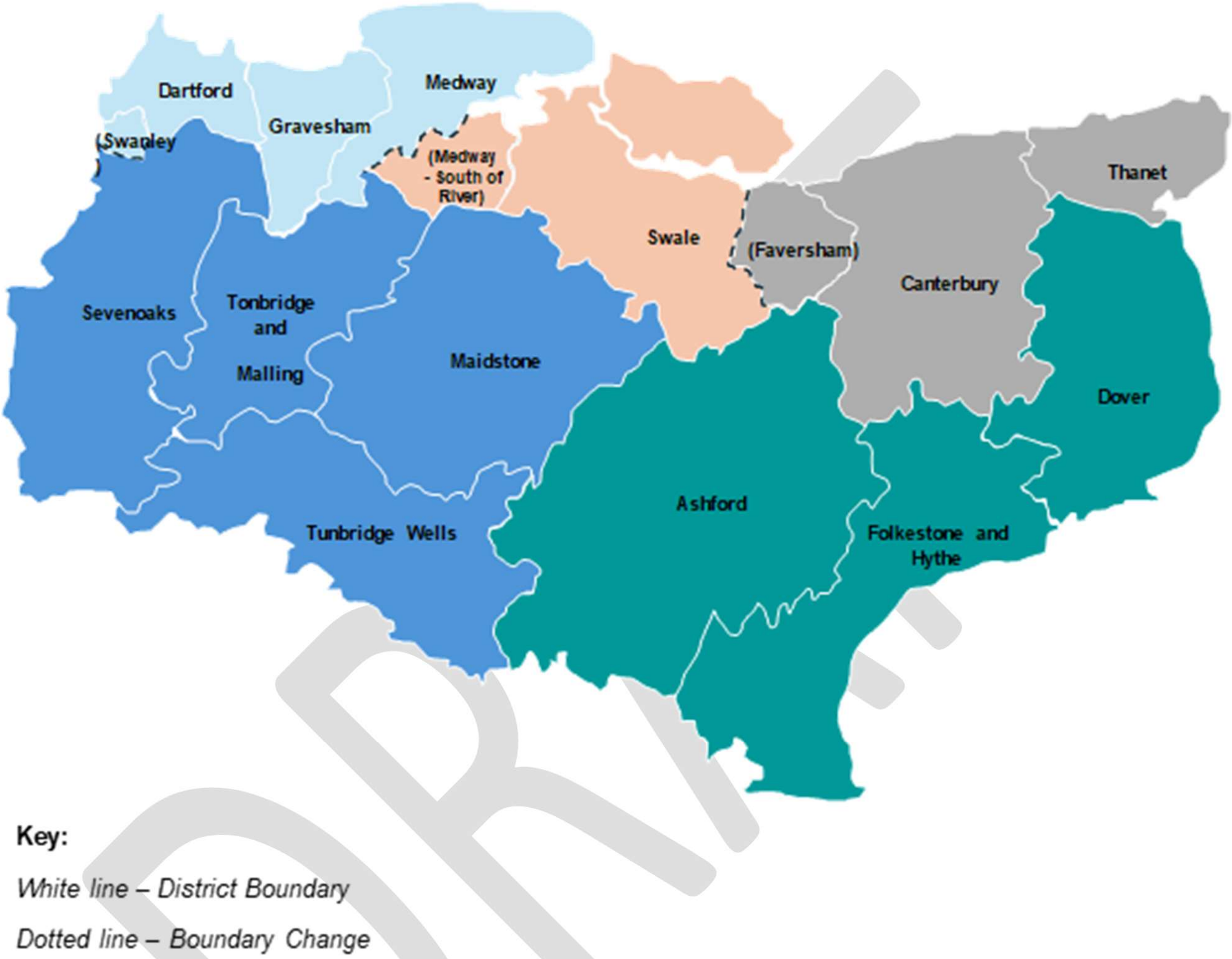
Executive summary

Introducing Option 5A

Option 5A sets out a five-unitary model of local government in Kent, built around natural places and identities, that will maximise the benefits of local, connected government and provide strong capacity for growth. The model is supported by the Borough Councils of [Councils to be inserted].



Unitary	Population	Description
North Kent • Dartford • Gravesham • Medway west of River Medway • Swanley	330,536	A strategically important logistics and infrastructure hub, North Kent will drive economic growth through its proximity to London, major transport corridors (M25, M2), and international gateways like Ebbsfleet and the Port of Sheerness. It will focus on clean growth, advanced manufacturing, and professional services, with a diverse population and strong urban regeneration potential.
West Kent • Maidstone • Sevenoaks (excluding Swanley) • Tonbridge & Malling • Tunbridge Wells	544,814	West Kent offers a mix of rural and urban economies, a thriving visitor and tourism sector, with increasing focus on innovation and service industries. Defined by strategic connectivity and a highly skilled workforce, supporting professional services, life sciences and creative

		sectors. The area has a high proportion of knowledge-based employment and is well-positioned to attract inward investment from London and beyond. Green infrastructure, heritage towns and quality of life are key drivers of investment in the sub-region.
East Kent • Canterbury • Faversham • Thanet	342,934	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. Thanet and surrounding coastal towns offer regeneration potential and tourism appeal, supported by lower land values.
Mid Kent • Medway east of River Medway • Swale excluding Faversham	340,286	A growing business hub in the Kent region with a demographically diverse population, Mid Kent is set up to drive the economy through business growth. It will focus on leveraging its local sector mix involving high value technology, engineering manufacturing and knowledge intensive businesses through the Chatham Innovation Park. Mid Kent will benefit from the business growth and will focus on skill retention and growth, shared infrastructure, ambition and innovation. The area also benefits from a strong network of local Universities and Colleges that will provide a sustainable pipeline of skilled workers to support the business growth in the region.
South Kent • Ashford • Dover • Folkstone & Hythe	373,115	As Kent's own international hub, South Kent will unlock significant economic potential. South Kent will drive economic growth by leveraging its strong footprint in the logistics and distribution industries through the Channel Corridor. The area also benefits from a robust and growing life sciences industry that currently houses the Discovery Park which is home to 160 companies spanning international pharmaceutical companies inviting further investment and economic growth.

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.

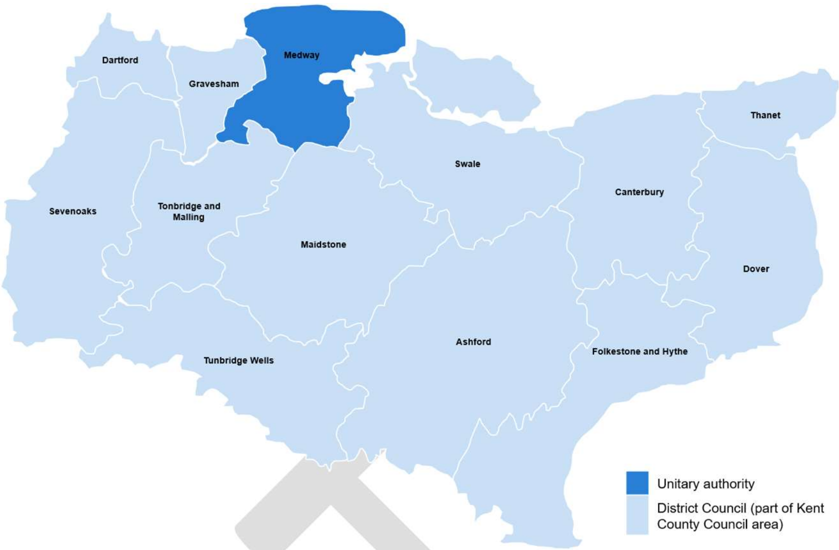
Kent's strategic location, skilled workforce and innovation hubs drive regional growth and support its case for devolution and local government reform.

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.

The case for Option 5A

Option 5A strikes the best balance between local place-shaping and strategic delivery. It is the only option that both designs councils around natural communities which have existed for hundreds of years, and coherent geographies, and provides a robust platform for growth and investment. Option 5A will strengthen the engagement with people and place that effective delivery depends on.

Option 5A resolves historic boundary misalignments around Swanley and Faversham, bringing local government boundaries in line with established health geographies (HCPs), as well as children’s social care and education commissioning arrangements, whilst also mirroring communities for worship and prayer. It also reflects the way local media and civic networks already operate across the County’s natural community groupings. These boundary misalignments, noted since 1969, would finally be addressed through this reorganisation, setting sustainable boundaries fit for the next 50 years.[1]

Importantly, Option 5A puts capacity and support where it is most needed. Against a range of metrics, there are four discrete regions within the County that have specific population needs (North, East, Mid and South Kent) - be that in terms of life expectancy, wider health determinants, skills attainment or economic factors - and one region (West Kent) which has less acute needs. Option 5A structures the new Unitary Councils in a way to match this need, with more agile Councils in those four areas to support communities through greater democratic representation. They also align with health, education, skills and employment geographies to improve outcomes for local people. This model therefore ensures tailored local focus whilst maintaining strategic coherence.

Option 5A provides the strongest relationship between the new councils and a future Strategic Authority, which will enable effective devolution of powers and resources for Kent.

Studies suggest that Kent’s growth potential could include more than 400,000 homes (circa 1 million additional residents) and 480,000 jobs beyond what is encapsulated within existing adopted Local Plans. This growth potential would see the overall population of Kent rise to around 3 million. With growth forecast in the areas where Option 5A currently shows the lower population numbers (North, Mid, East and South Kent), this model will future-proof local government by aligning with the long term growth projections. As the population expands, the five council model will naturally equalise in size, ensuring responsive, resilient and locally attuned governance.

[1] https://archive.org/details/1969-royal-commission-local-gov-vol-1-report/mode/2up)

The benefits of Option 5A are clear: better-quality housing, improved jobs/skills opportunities and improved health outcomes for our residents. It will also simultaneously deliver sustained economic growth for both Kent and the wider UK economy. This option will realise the unlocked potential that Kent has to offer.

We have summarised the key arguments for why the five-unitary model is best for Kent.

Key theme	Arguments	Government Criteria
Reflects natural communities and geographies	• Delivers authorities fully enabled to drive growth across the area by aligning housing delivery in the right areas, economic hubs and transport infrastructure, alongside established travel to work, education and health trends. • Uses the once in a generation opportunity to reorganise three local government boundaries to best fit our sense of place. • Reflects where we expect growth in Kent in the next 50 years and unlocks that growth by building regional architecture which harnesses those opportunities.	Criteria 1, ,3, 4, 5, 6
Delivers housing and economic growth across the whole area.	• Reflects local housing markets, and the migratory effect of London, while building scale to plan strategically to deliver housing growth across Kent. • Enables the future growth of Kent and establishes logical economic areas as the right foundation for sustainable, long-term growth. • Consolidates the existing travel to work trends spanning bus, rail and road connectivity.	Criteria 2, 3, 6
Savings of £65.7m which will pay back the investment in 14 years.	• Generates recurrent savings of £65.7m which will pay back the initial investment in 14 years. • Entails greater investment in the short term, but designs councils that ensure strong service delivery, place-based public service reform and sustainable growth, alongside providing greater scope to deliver long-term financial sustainability.	Criteria 2
Reflecting partnerships and how services are delivered	• Builds councils where health and care partnerships and supporting health architecture will operate together, providing the right footprint for prevention and early intervention and for wider public service reform. • Reflects how adult social care, children's services and education are commissioned	Criteria 3, 6

	• Aligns with acute hospital demand supporting health and care integration, partnership working and public service reform. • Reflects existing police boundaries allowing for safer communities and opportunities to continue good community engagement.	
Strengthening cultural and historic identities	• Builds boundaries that reflect local needs, historic and future community identities and the natural and infrastructural geography of Kent. • Establishes councils that are closest to communities in Kent and reflect local communities, cultures and the identities of areas within Kent.	Criteria 1, 4, 6
Establishing truly local authorities	• Establishes five councils across Kent and Medway maximising how local councils in Kent can realise the benefits from LGR.	Criteria 1, 5
Strong governance and healthy decision-making	• Establishes five constituent authorities to a Strategic Authority and more constituent authorities provides stronger governance, debate and decision-making and better reflect the needs of local communities and the areas they reside in.	Criteria 5
Councils designed around communities	• Establishes councils focussed on communities allowing for more tailored and targeted service delivery, agile decision-making, community empowerment, co-creation and purposeful engagement. • Designs councils around communities and how they live and work in Kent, providing the right foundations to build community resilience, stronger emergency planning, intelligence and prevention into how public services work.	Criteria 4, 6
Fostering strong partnerships to connect communities	• Consolidates many council partnerships and shared services across Kent to build better resilience and support positive outcomes for our residents. • Retains existing deanery and diocese community relationships for the Christian faith, as well as patterns of worship within the Sikh communities of Kent further strengthening local identity and allowing our residents to continue building their strong communities.	Criteria 1, 4, 6

Base case
This is a Type B proposal entailing modifications to existing Kent council boundaries under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. Section 5 includes a base case which meets the government’s criteria and the modifications proposed.

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 5A are set out below:

LGR option	Implementation costs (one-off) (£m)	Reorganisation savings (gross) (£m)	Disaggregation costs (£m)*	Recurring annual revenue savings (£m)**	Estimated payback period
Option 5A	139.1	65.7	(46.0) – (68.1)	19.7 – (2.4)	14.0 years – no payback

**A range has been applied specifically for disaggregation costs following collaborative discussions around different scenarios for the impact of LGR on commissioned spend across adult and children's social care.*
***Recurring revenue savings = gross reorganisation savings less disaggregation costs*

The range of disaggregation costs has been agreed through the collaborative working of Kent finance officers. Our business case assumes increases in commissioned spend at the lower end of that range. There is evidence that councils with a population of 250-350k have lower unit costs across adult nursing and residential and S251 looked after children and children in residential care.[2] While the cost of care packages is complex this may relate to councils closer to communities being better able to tailor services and care packages to the strengths and needs of communities.

Government has been clear that whilst financial sustainability is a consideration, it is not the only indicator against which proposals will be judged. Option 5A delivers payback over the longer term whilst also placing resources where they are needed most to support local communities. The economic growth forecasts which come from that – potentially unlocking nearly 500,000 jobs which are not within existing Local Plans – and the financial return to the Treasury as a result should not be underestimated or ignored.

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.

[2] Local Authority Interactive Tool 2023/24 and ASC-FR returns