

GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE COUNCIL
17 MARCH 2025

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

1. Summary

1.1 This report asks the Council to note the invitation received from the Minister for Local Government to submit a proposal for local government reorganisation in Kent and the draft interim plan that is to be presented in response to the invitation for Dartford Borough Council.

2. RECOMMENDATION

2.1 To consider initial proposals for local government re-organisation affecting Dartford Borough Council set out at Appendix B.

2.2 To recommend to Cabinet to approve and send the draft interim plan.

3. Background and Discussion

3.1. On 16 December 2024 the Government published the English Devolution White Paper which made clear their intent to deliver both devolution and local government reorganisation. An all Member briefing was given on 27 January 2025 to outline the contents of the White Paper and the possible implications for the Council and the Borough.

3.2. Following the publication of the White Paper, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution wrote to upper tier authorities 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 notification was received that Kent had not been selected to be part of the DPP. However, an invitation was then sent to the council leaders in Kent to submit a bid for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). 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*". A copy of this letter is attached at Appendix A.

3.3. 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.

3.4. A draft county-wide response has been put together which is attached at Appendix B. The response has been put together in a very short

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period of time and is subject to ongoing discussions between council leaders so may change between now and the date of submission.

- 3.5. At the present time, the response does not include specific proposals for the geographic make-up of unitaries in Kent. Work is ongoing to establish one or more possible geographies but, as the response makes clear, there is consensus amongst Kent Council Leaders that there should be either three or four unitaries within the county, subject to an open and transparent public consultation. 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, with a view to enter into a full public consultation.
- 3.6. Some of the Kent authorities have agreed to produce additional information for the submission by way of an appendix. This will show information on four possible unitary models. Some of these councils have also commissioned external advice on the financial costs and savings associated with the various models and will be including this data within the appendix. This Council will not be submitting this additional appendix as it is of the view that potential geographies should not be put forward until public engagement has taken place.
- 3.7. 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 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.

4. Relationship to the Corporate Plan

Not applicable

5. Financial, legal, staffing and other implications and risk assessments*

Financial Implications	The Council has set aside funding within the IIR to cover the cost of support needed in preparing for local government reorganisation The Council's finances are currently in a strong position with expected challenges in the future. However, it should be noted that the Government has said that there will be no
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Staffing Implications	This could have profound implications for staffing. If the proposals are implemented, this will lead to the Council ceasing to exist as an entity. Staff are being briefed on developments with regards to reorganisation and there will need to be dedicated workstreams introduced as part of a reorganisation programme to manage the impact on staff. The proposals are also likely to impact on the recruitment and retention of staff
Administrative Implications	Reorganisation will have significant implications on all Council workstreams and will require detailed planning to implement
Risk Assessment	<p>There will be risks associated with reorganisation including to service delivery, performance and staffing as attention is diverted to the setting up of the new unitary. There will be reputational risks with partners and contractors in dealing with an organisation that will not exist after April 2028. The impact of reorganisation will mean that decision making is undertaken for a shortened timeframe with potential sub-optimal outcomes.</p> <p>This will be included as a new risk on the Council's Strategic Risk Register</p>

6. Details of Exempt Information Category

Not applicable

7. Appendices

Appendix A – Letter to Kent Council Leaders from MHCLG
Appendix B – Draft Kent-wide interim submission to MHCLG

BACKGROUND PAPERS

<u>Documents consulted</u>	<u>Date / File Ref</u>	<u>Report Author</u>	<u>Section and Directorate</u>	<u>Exempt Information Category</u>
English Devolution White Paper		Sarah Martin	Leadership Team	