
Extraordinary Council

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, ME10 3HT on Wednesday, 19 March 2025 from 7.40 pm - 8.18 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Mike Baldock, Monique Bonney, Lloyd Bowen, Hayden Brawn, Derek Carnell, Cavanagh, Shelley Cheesman, Alex Eyre, Charles Gibson, Tim Gibson, Alastair Gould, Angela Harrison, James Hunt, Carole Jackson, Elliott Jayes, Rich Lehmann, Peter Marchington, Claire Martin, Ben J Martin, Charlie Miller, Tara Noe, Tom Nundy, Chris Palmer, Richard Palmer, Carrie Pollard, Paul Stephen, Sarah Stephen, Terry Thompson, Karen Watson, Tony Winckless, Ashley Wise and Dolley Wooster.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Robin Harris and Jo Millard and Larissa Reed.

OFFICERS PRESENT (VIRTUALLY): Martyn Cassell, Steph Curtis, Duncan Haynes, Claudette Valmond and Emma Wiggins.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE (VIRTUALLY): Councillors Andy Booth, Kieran Golding, Pete Neal, Julian Speed and Mike Whiting .

APOLOGIES: Councillors Andy Booth, Roger Clark, Simon Clark, Kieran Golding, Lee-Anne Moore, Pete Neal, Hannah Perkin, Ashley Shiel, Julien Speed and Mike Whiting.

756 **Emergency Evacuation Procedure**

The Mayor outlined the emergency evacuation procedure.

757 **Declarations of Interest**

No interests were declared.

758 **Local Government Review**

The Mayor advised that a briefing on the Local Government Review (LGR) had taken place directly prior to the Extraordinary Council meeting, and this had given Members the opportunity to ask questions. He confirmed with Members that they had all seen the to follow report and appendices.

The Leader of the Council introduced the report which set out and explained the contents of the Government's Devolution White Paper and was an invitation to submit a proposal for Local Government Reorganisation. He proposed the recommendations.

In seconding the recommendations, the Deputy Leader reserved his right to speak.

The Leader of the Conservative group referred to the uncertainty of proposals and said the big debate was over how many unitary authorities there should be. He listed the benefits and drawbacks of different size unitary authorities, and the costs and the logistics of integrating services. The Leader of the Conservative group said staying engaged with the process was crucial.

The Leader of the Swale Independent Alliance group said the proposals were undemocratic and would destroy the link between local communities and their local Council. He considered the proposals were rushed and said Swale Borough Council

(SBC) should wait to see what happened with the first tranche of Councils that go forward, and learn from their experiences. The Leader of the SIA group said consideration should be made to submit a side letter indicating SBC's preferred option. He said his personal preference was for four authorities as he considered this put SBC in a better position with partner authorities.

The Leader of the Reform UK group expressed his concern over the proposals as he said it was being rushed. He acknowledged the briefing that took place prior to the meeting had clarified issues but said that the devil was in the detail which was not yet known. He added that SBC did need to progress and had to be included. The Leader of the Reform UK party said there had been a missed opportunity by Government to reorganise combined social services and health.

The Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrat group said the proposal should be supported to ensure SBC had a voice. He referred to the seven authorities that had already shown their support and said that whilst SBC might not yet agree with the geographies, they were the current proposals that were under discussion. The Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrat group supported signing the letter.

The Leader of the Green group referred to the lack of detail from Government. He said that the U-Gov survey undertaken in December 2024 showed that 49% of voters in the south of England considered their local Councils to be the right size, with 6% considering their Council was too small. The Leader of the Green group said the proposal weakened local decision-making and stripped communities of their voice and he was critical of the Government's proposals.

Other Members made points including:

- This was the right approach;
- did not think it was being rushed;
- more work was needed to consider options and the implications but should not be sitting back;
- would not support a side letter;
- the briefing was useful and there needed to be regular updates for all Members;
- should be careful what was being signed if they did not understand it; and
- highlighted that some authorities did not have the shared values that Swale had.

Councillor Charles Gibson proposed the following amendment:

"To remove the word 'not' from recommendation three in the report"

The amendment was seconded by Councillor Monique Bonney.

Members discussed the amendment and made the following points:

- Supported the amendment;
- did not support the amendment as thought there were other options which could be included;
- the amendment served no purpose; and
- it was important that all Councils in Kent were aware of SBC's intentions and that they showed positivity.

The Chief Executive clarified that signing the letter to show interest would not exclude SBC from alternative options going forward, and the deadline for the business case for SBC's proposals was 28 November 2025, and this was a statutory deadline.

On being put to the vote, Members voted against the amendment.

Members then continued to speak on the substantive motion and made points including:

- There needed to be continuity of services provided to public as Members and senior officers would have a lot of work to carry out; and
- there would be fantastic opportunities for businesses and individuals.

The Deputy Leader thanked all group leaders for the discussions they had been involved with so far and he said he looked forward to all Members contributing in the future. He said many residents wanted to preserve local identities, and community involvement and maintain their connections to local Councillors, and it was important to involve residents in discussions. He encouraged all Councillors to communicate with their residents.

In summing up, the Leader agreed to include and encouraged all 47 Members in discussions going forward.

Resolved:

(1) That the invitation received from the Minister for Local Government to work with other councils in Kent to submit a proposal for local government reorganisation be noted.

(2) That the contents of the draft interim plan that has been drafted in response to the invitation be noted.

(3) That the Council does not sign up to any geographies or financial information at the current time.

(4) That a cross-party working group has been established to oversee discussions on this issue (and associated issues on devolution) be noted.

(5) That delegated authority be given to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Group Leaders to agree and submit the final proposal on 21 March 2025.

759 Political Balance - Allocation of Committee Seats

The Mayor confirmed with Members they had all received the to-follow report and appendices. He advised that prior to the meeting, the Liberal Democrat group and the Reform UK group had drawn lots to decide which group would give up an additional seat, and the Liberal Democrat group had lost the draw and given up a seat on the Economy and Property Committee.

The Leader of the Council proposed the recommendations which were seconded by the Leader of the Conservative group.

The Leader of the Conservative group thanked officers for their work on a complex and technical procedure.

Resolved:

(1) That the political balance calculation as set out at in Appendix II be agreed.

(2) That Group Leaders allocate seats to Committees in accordance with the agreed political balance.

Mayor

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All minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel