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## WESTERN AREA COMMITTEE

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**MINUTES** of the Meeting held in The Committee Room, Swale Borough Council, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne ME10 3HT on Thursday, 27 November 2025 from 7.00 pm - 8.40 pm.

**PRESENT:** Councillors Mike Baldock, Monique Bonney, Ann Cavanagh, Lloyd Chapman, Paul Stephen (Chair) and Sarah Stephen (Vice-Chair).

**NOMINATED PARISH COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVES:** Parish/Town Councillors Sue Chapman (Bobbing Parish Council (PC)) and Vivien Rich (Tunstall PC).

**NOMINATED PARISH COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVES (Virtually):** Parish/Town Councillors Brian Clarke (Bredgar PC) and Liz Trott (Bapchild PC).

**OFFICERS PRESENT:** Steph Curtis and Janet Dart.

**OFFICERS PRESENT (Virtually):** Lisa Fillery and Claire Stanbury.

**APOLOGIES:** Councillors Roger Clark, James Hunt, Chris Palmer and Richard Palmer.

### 511 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chair read out the emergency evacuation procedure.

### 512 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 9 September 2025 (Minute Nos 274 – 283) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

### 513 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

### 514 BUDGET 2026/27

The Director of Resources and the Head of Finance and Procurement gave a presentation on the Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) Proposals 2025/26 to 2029/30.

The Director of Resources said that Swale Borough Council (SBC) legally must set a balanced budget and explained the financial challenges which included rising costs due to inflation. Decisions needed to be made to raise income and make savings to offset rising costs. There was an estimated budget gap of £665k for 2026/27 even with current savings proposals. Reserves would help set a balanced budget for 2026/27 but would be depleted by 2029/30 without further ongoing savings being found.

The process for setting the budget for 2026/27 started in June 2025 when a Cross Party Member Working Group met to agree an approach to setting the budget. Full Council would meet on 18 February 2026 to approve the final budget.

The draft budget was approved for consultation at the Policy & Resources Committee on 26 November 2025 and would close on 9 January 2026. The consultation could be found at [swale.gov.uk/budget-consultation](https://swale.gov.uk/budget-consultation).

The following comments were raised:

- Further to the Government announcement that business rates would be reduced for leisure activities, would that impact SBC?

The Director of Resources said that if the proposals meant the reduction in rates was covered by Section 31 grant funding, then it should not adversely impact SBC.

#### **515 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION (GOVERNMENT WANTS US TO DELIVER YOUR SERVICES DIFFERENTLY)**

The Policy & Communities Manager gave an update on the Local Government Reorganisation. She went through the timetable and said that the final business case submissions had been made to Government on 28 November 2025 and the next stage was a public consultation which would be carried out in Spring 2026 followed by the Government's decision on their chosen model by Summer 2026. Shadow elections would be held in May 2027 and then the 'go live' date (vesting day) was 1 April 2028.

Each district in Kent along with Medway and Kent County Council (KCC) selected their favoured unitary model for Kent. The SBC Full Council met on 19 November 2025 and agreed that their chosen option for Kent was 4b which was made up of 4 unitary authorities which would mean that Swale would form a unitary council with Ashford and Folkestone and Hythe.

Full business cases for each unitary option were available at: <https://kentcouncilleaders.org.uk/councils-reveal-draft-business-cases-for-new-councils/>.

The following comments were raised:

- How would the Government assess if an option was viable?; and
- how many options would the Government consult on?

The Policy & Communities Manager responded that the Government had set criteria which the options would be assessed against. The Government may decide to consult on all 5 options if there were considered viable.

#### **516 COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE REVIEW (POTENTIAL CHANGES TO ARRANGEMENTS FOR TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS)**

Councillor Mike Baldock, the Vice-Chair of the Community Governance Review (CGR) Member Steering Group gave a presentation on CGR, explaining why it was being carried out.

CGR was an opportunity for residents, or the principal authority, to kick start a process around governance of the Borough. It was an opportunity to make governance better reflect local identities and facilitate a more effective local government. The review was an opportunity to consider how individuals and groups within the community were listened to and able to influence decisions that affected them.

Residents could be affected in one of the following ways:

If you lived in an area that was currently unparished:

- A new parish or town council could be created;
- one of the existing parish councils could expand to include the area in which you lived; or
- no changes.

If you lived in an area which was already parished:

- The council could change its size;
- there could be some changes to the boundaries; or
- no changes.

The Policy & Communities Manager said that CGR was a 12-month process which started when the Terms of Reference were published. There would then be a first stage public consultation from 18 December 2025 to 9 February 2026. The review would then move onto draft recommendations compiling all consultation responses and informing a second stage consultation in Spring 2026.

Following the second stage consultation, final recommendations would be drafted to go to Full Council in September 2026. If it was decided by Full Council to accept the recommendations, any changes would be implemented at the May 2027 local elections.

Any questions/comments/concerns please email [CGR@swale.gov.uk](mailto:CGR@swale.gov.uk)

The following comments were raised:

- With Sittingbourne currently being unparished, it was important that residents were made aware of the positive difference it would make for it to become parished;
- local projects could be achieved as there would be custodianship; and
- if Highsted Park, Sittingbourne was approved, other parish councils may wish to change their boundaries.

## 517 PUBLIC FORUM

No issues were raised.

**518 MATTERS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MEETINGS**

Members noted the update report.

**Swale Local Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP)** – Members stated that comments were raised during the Highsted Park enquiry that should the plan be approved, the proposed walking and cycling routes would not be safe to use. Members also said that the Lower Road between Tonge and Teynham was a dangerous road for walking and cycling due to the high speed of some motorists driving along it. The Policy & Engagement Officer was asked to feed these comments back to the Active Travel Co-ordinator.

**Area Committees Review** – Further to the Policy & Resources Committee agreeing the proposed recommendation that Western Area Committee meetings should take place in Swale House, Councillor Mike Baldock proposed that Western Area Committee meetings should take place in community venues in the Western Area. This was seconded by Councillor Monique Bonney and on being put to the vote was agreed.

**Resolved:**

**1) That Western Area Committee meetings should take place in community venues in the Western Area**

*Post meeting note – advice was sought after the meeting and the Deputy Head of Legal Partnership said that according to the Constitution, this decision did not appear to be within the remit of an Area Committee. As the Policy & Resources Committee had recommended a decision to Full Council, the matter could be raised at Full Council and the ‘vote’ of the Area Committee brought to the attention of Council.*

**519 SWALE BUS PARTNERSHIP FORUM**

The Minutes of the last Swale Local Bus Forum were noted.

The Western Area Committee representative on the Forum, Councillor Mike Baldock, was asked to find out if any funding would be made available for rural bus services.

**520 LOCAL ISSUES TO BE RAISED**

Councillor Sarah Stephen said she had been contacted by a resident who was concerned about flags continuing to be put up, especially in Minterne Avenue, Sittingbourne. The Policy & Communities Manager said that an internal officer group had been set up to look at this issue and their view was that unless the flags caused obstruction or danger, they would be left in place. Any concerns about community tensions should be reported to the Community Safety Unit.

Councillor Mike Baldock asked for an update on what was being done to tackle loneliness in the Western Area. The Policy & Communities Manager said that

Swale Community & Voluntary Services (CVS) were leading on this piece of work and she would ask them to provide Western Area Committee with an update. It was suggested that a representative from Swale CVS attend the next Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) meeting to give an update.

Members suggested that maps be circulated showing where Western Area Committee covers. It was also suggested that general information should be available on the SBC website on Area Committees in addition to meeting information.

**521 MATTERS REFERRED TO SERVICE COMMITTEE CHAIRS FOR CONSIDERATION**

No issues were raised.

Chair

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