

County Councillor Update for Parishes, 4 September 2026

Due to the significance of the government's recent announcements on the review of local government, my update this month will cover that topic only.

New Unitary Authorities

On 16 July 2026, the government announced its decision on the reorganisation of local government in Kent and Medway. Currently, services are provided by the County Council, 12 district councils and Medway Council. The government decision was that from April 2028, those Councils would be abolished and services would be provided by four new 'Unitary authorities' across Kent and Medway; a West Kent Council (covering Sevenoaks, Tunbridge Wells, Maidstone and Tonbridge and Malling), a North Kent Council (covering Medway, Dartford and Gravesham), an East Kent Council (covering Canterbury, Thanet and Dover) and a Mid-Kent Council for this area (covering Folkestone and Hythe, Ashford and Swale).

The Timetable

A Statutory Change Order would be placed before Parliament to ratify the decision. If the government keeps to its envisaged timetable, elections to the new 'Shadow' Unitary Authorities would take place on 6 May 2027, with the 'Shadow Authorities' operating from that time until the 'vesting date' of April 2028 when the new Councils would 'go live'. In essence, current Councils would continue to deliver services until April 2028, with the predecessor Councils working parallel to the shadow 'successor' Councils until that date.

Cost

The reorganisation will be costly, with independent financial consultants putting the cost at many hundreds of millions of pounds. To date, only a tiny proportion of likely costs have been pledged to be met by the government, with the County Council fearing that many hundreds of millions of pounds of costs will have to be met by Council Tax payers (hence its previous submission to government on the subject).

Keeping Services Going

All Councils are determined to maintain existing services and not see a reduction in quality or scope during the transition period, and ensure that the new authorities can operate successfully and legally in April 2028. The transition work will entail disaggregating County Council services down to the new Unitary authorities, and district councils 'aggregating' their services to the Unitaries. This will be a particular challenge for the County Council, which provides the bulk of the services in Kent (KCC spends approximately 80% of local authority spend in Kent, whilst individual district councils such as Folkestone and Hythe, spend approximately 2% each). The transition work will be overseen by a County-wide Programme Board, Area Leads, a Senior Responsible Officer (the Chief Executive of KCC) and Joint Committees involving representatives of all the current local authorities.

Joint Committees

Formal Joint Committees will be established following the publication of the Statutory Change Order to ensure successful transition to the new authorities. For the Mid-Kent area, this will include a total of six Members in total from the three current district councils and six Members from Kent County Council. Until those Formal Joint Committees are established, Voluntary Joint Committees will operate, to consider constitutions, to audit infrastructure, make provisional plans on staffing, and scope out informal vision for the proposed new areas. I will have a seat on all four of the Voluntary Joint Committees across Kent and Medway as one of the KCC representatives, due to being the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Local Government Reorganisation.

Members and Warding

The government's proposal is that the Mid-Kent Council should have a total of 60 elected Members. The announcement from government on the warding arrangements is expected shortly. The likelihood is that warding will be based primarily on current County Council divisions, rather than district wards. The elections to the 'Shadow' and therefore 'successor' Councils would take place on 6 May 2027.

A Mayoralty for Kent and Medway

KCC, Medway Council and all 12 district councils have notified government that they would like to see a Mayoral Strategic Authority established across Kent and Medway. The Mayoralty would provide a strategic overview and ensure provision of cross-authority work in areas such as strategic planning, waste and transport. The government has stated that additional powers would be devolved to areas with Mayoralties. The government is keen that any new 'Strategic Authority' should be in place by the end of 2028, although more information on this could be included in a government White Paper on Devolution this Autumn. We could hear the government's decision on a Mayoralty for Kent and Medway within weeks.

Chris Hespe

Kent County Councillor for Elham Valley, and Cabinet Member for Local Government Efficiency and Reorganisation

District Councillor Report

Folkestone Racecourse – Since this emergency measure was introduced for overspill parking from Eurotunnel, it appears that it has not yet been actioned. This is, of course, a good thing, and, although there is no cost to FHDC, it will be interesting to know the cost to general taxation!

HGV Parking in Otterpool Layby – I have recently been looking into the current situation and questioning what enforcement has been undertaken. I was told that inspections take place at

weekends – I have asked that these also be implemented for weekday evenings when the parking seems to be more prevalent. I also queried about the cleaning of the layby and have been informed that this takes place regularly when the bins are emptied.

National Planning Reform - The government is introducing a **national scheme of delegation** for Planning & Licensing Committees to standardize how planning functions are allocated between officers and committees. Applications are categorized into two tiers:

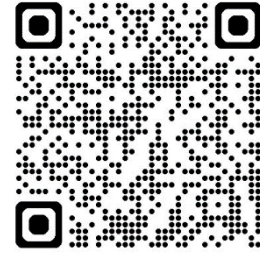
- **Tier A:** Applications that must always be delegated to officers, such as minor developments and certain reserved matters approvals. These will not be considered by committees.
- **Tier B:** Applications that are delegated to officers by default but can be referred to a committee if the Chief Planning Officer and Committee Chair agree.

The reforms set a **maximum size for planning committees**, currently proposed at **13 members**, to balance political representation. The Planning & Licensing Committee at FHDC is currently 12 Members but going into a Unitary Council covering three current Councils, could prove extremely difficult since both Ashford and Swale have more than 13 Members on their Planning Committee. I am waiting for a District Councillor Briefing on the new regulations to learn more. Further information can be found at [Planning Committees and the National Scheme of Delegation of Planning Functions: Guidance for local planning authorities in England - GOV.UK](#)

Local Government Re-organisation – now that we know that the model decided for the Unitary for our area will be made up of FHDC, Dover and Swale, - now called 'Mid Kent', the Overview & Scrutiny Committee have received an update on the current situation – see Minutes [Agenda for Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday, 28th July, 2026, 6.00 pm | Folkestone & Hythe District Council](#)

There are a lot of questions to be asked on how the Unitary will work, eg where the main Office will be, who will be the Chief Executive, how will a Cabinet and Leader be decided, where services will run from, how the democratic system will operate, etc.

Dr George was hoping to go quietly into retirement but the Members of the Patients Participation Group at Sellindge Surgery, wanted to mark his retirement. Dr George did not want any fuss but suggested patients might like to support his chosen charity, Mary's Meals UK (www.marysmeals.org.uk) – or you can use the QR code, there is also a book in the Surgery Reception that patients are invited to sign.



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Update – 7 September 2026

Government Re-organisation – yesterday there was a Ministerial Statement advising that Re-organisation in Kent has been paused for the decision to be reviewed! It was also confirmed that the normal cycle of local elections will take place next May. Further details to follow.

Local Plan Scoping Consultation - FHDC is preparing a new Local Plan and is inviting comments from local people. Details can be found on a new dedicated webpage at www.folkestoneandhythelocalplan.co.uk There is, in addition, a Strategic Environmental Assessment Scoping Report on which the Council is also seeking comments. Comments can be made on both consultations via the website. The consultation ends at 4pm on Friday 16 October.

Folca 2 – FHDC has submitted a planning application aimed at preparing the Art Deco section of the building to become an active mixed-used building with commercial units and a medical centre. Subject to NHS approval, two GP practices will occupy the upper floors, while retail and commercial tenants will be located on the ground and basement levels. Comments are invited on this application 26/1453/FH via the planning portal by 8 October 2026.

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