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Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council
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21 March 2025

Dear Minister of State,

Local Government Reorganisation in Kent

We are writing as the leaders of Maidstone, Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Malling and Tunbridge Wells councils in response to your letter of 5 February in which you formally invited us to work with other council leaders in Kent to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation and in which you set out criteria and guidance for the proposal.

The criteria attached to your letter specifically requested likely options for the size and boundaries of new councils and indicative costs and efficiency saving opportunities.

We are pleased that Kent has been able to agree a single submission, but we have been unable to agree preferred (or even possible) geographical boundaries on a pan-county basis.

We are collectively concerned that we are in danger of spending large amounts of time, capacity and taxpayers' money on the development of 'competing bids', and your letter made clear that *"it is not in council taxpayers' interest to devote public funds and your valuable time and effort into the development of multiple proposals which unnecessarily fragment services [and] compete against one another"*. A key lesson of previous LGR exercises where such competitive bids have been developed is that local leaders, staff and taxpayers have lamented the time spent on the production of detailed (and expensive) business cases and have subsequently wished that they had spent that time, money and effort on actually preparing for reorganisation and maximising the opportunities of new

unitary structures. We therefore strongly encourage the Government to provide greater certainty about the criteria they have specified for determining the size and geography for new unitary councils and early feedback on the acceptability or otherwise of any options that fall outside of them.

We strongly believe that the emerging evidence clearly points to the best configuration for Kent as being three unitary councils based on the information set out in our supplementary submission. Specifically, we would note:

- Financial analysis suggests that, whilst a three-unitary model has the potential to save money, a four unitary model would result in an annual net additional cost (because of the additional implementation and disaggregation costs).
- The majority of partners we consulted support a three-unitary model (including health, police and fire), and some have noted that a four unitary model would result in additional costs for them.
- A three unitary model aligns most closely to other public sector geographies (health in particular) and would provide the greatest opportunities to deliver public sector reform and greater integration/preventative work with other public sector bodies.
- A three unitary model provides greatest scope for housing delivery (with any of the four unitary models, at least one proposed unitary would be affected in its ability to deliver housing by planning or other constraints).
- A three unitary model most comprehensively meets the criteria set out in your letter of 5 February – particularly in respect of population size, taxbase, resilience, value for money, opportunities for public sector reform and sustainability of key demand-led services.
- A three unitary model provides the least risk in terms of transition and implementation given the reduced requirement (and cost) of disaggregating services.

Our purpose in writing is to note that evidence suggests a three unitary model most closely aligns to the Government's criteria. We would be keen to maximise the time, effort and money being spent on reimagining, redesigning and implementing changes to local government rather than on developing costly business cases for competing models.

We will shortly be receiving the results of some work that has been commissioned from PwC which assesses various models against the Government's criteria. We would welcome the opportunity to engage with you as further evidence becomes available.

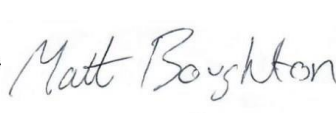
Yours sincerely,



Stuart Jeffery
Leader, Maidstone
Borough Council



Roddy Hogarth
Leader, Sevenoaks District Council



Matt Boughton
Leader, Tonbridge & Malling
Borough



Ben Chapelard
Leader, Tunbridge Wells
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