



## Royal Town Forum Newsletter Issue 2

# Kent votes for the ‘fast track’ to devolution



At its Council meeting on Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> January, members of Kent County Council (KCC) voted to fast track’ devolution for Kent. KCC has submitted a joint request with Medway Council to be included in the Government’s Devolution Priority Programme (DPP).

If its request is accepted, elections for a New Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) will be held in May 2026 and local government reorganised by April 2027 or 2028. This will probably result in the cancellation of the local elections due in May this year.

Speaking at the Council meeting, KCC leader, Roger Gough said “We know that change is coming and the sooner we engage the more scope we have to shape it.”

## Gough: ‘We cannot go on as we are’

Cllr Gough commented that both the past and present governments had plans for ‘Mayoral devolution’ and this ‘fast paced’ change will be felt right across the country. He said “*We cannot go on as we are...*” but there are “*huge risks and challenges with this reorganisation.*” Some councillors were concerned that the new larger unitary councils would not be ‘local’ enough. Furthermore, they said, the new devolved powers would only go to the new ‘mayors’ and scrapping the next local elections was not ‘democratic’.

## Will we be in the West Kent Authority?

The Town Forum’s chair, Adrian Berendt commented that the likely outcome will be a single mayor and 3 or 4 new Unitary Authorities covering all of Kent and Medway. One of these will probably be a new West Kent Authority covering all of Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Malling, Tunbridge Wells and possibly Maidstone, replacing the existing district / borough councils.



While the RTW Town Forum welcomes the promised devolution of powers and funding to a West Kent Authority, in theory, there are dangers ahead:

- Matters such as transport and planning are currently split between Borough and County Councils. Unless they are brought together in the new Unitary Authority the current unsatisfactory split of responsibilities will remain.
- Decisions currently made in the Town Hall in Tunbridge Wells will go to (say) Kings Hill. This carries the risk of power becoming MORE, not LESS centralised.

Towns with existing Town Councils will benefit as local residents will keep democratic control or at least influence over decisions which affect their daily lives. That’s why the Town Forum is urgently seeking the formation of a Town Council for Royal Tunbridge Wells.

## Why do we need a Town Council?

- 1) Royal Tunbridge Wells is the only part of the Borough without a Town or Parish Council. Historically, Borough Councillors, most of whom live in, or near RTW, looked after the interests of the town's residents. Within a Unitary Authority, RTW may have less influence without its own Town Council.
- 2) As residents of RTW we pay a special levy of around £50 per resident for facilities in the town<sup>1</sup> and yet we have no say over how the Borough council spends the amount raised – over £2.5m per year. The Council also raises many charges in the town for services, including car parking, events etc. Elsewhere in the Borough each Parish and Town Council (such as Southborough, Paddock Wood) publishes a full income and expenditure reports to show how its own precept is spent. This must change.

## Will a Town Council be more expensive to run?

Unlikely. While it depends on exactly what services residents want in Tunbridge Wells, other Town Councils charge similar amounts to the existing £50 paid by RTW residents, for example: Southborough Town Council charges around £65 per year, while Sevenoaks Town Council £55 and Faversham around £30 per person. They too have responsibilities covering many local assets and services.

## Why not 'wait and see' what happens when the Unitary is set up?

By then it will be too late. Decisions about who decides what in Tunbridge Wells will be made by those in charge of the new Unitary. If we want a say in those decisions, we need a roadmap towards a new Town Council now. Tonbridge has already started the process.

## What does the Town Forum think?

While the Town Forum management group is fully in favour of preparing for a Town Council immediately, it wants to hear from members. If you agree, please contact and encourage members of your group to ask your local ward councillor to commit to supporting a Town Council and to lobby the Borough Council to start preparations now!

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## FIND OUT MORE

- **Roger Gough's statement to the KCC Council 9<sup>th</sup> January**  
<https://news.kent.gov.uk/articles/devolution-is-coming.-the-only-question-is-how-far-we-shape-it>

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The RTW Town Forum will communicate regularly with members about the impact of plans for devolution on TWBC. You may forward this Newsletter to your residents and members to keep them in the picture. Volunteers keen to contribute to the discussions are welcome particularly those with local government, communication, finance and similar backgrounds. Contact RTW Town Forum at: [rtwtownforum@gmail.com](mailto:rtwtownforum@gmail.com) ; [www.townforum.org.uk](http://www.townforum.org.uk) ; X @townforum ; Facebook @RoyalTunbridgeWellsTownForum.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Special Expenses' on your council tax statement