

Update on Local Government Reorganisation

Volume 1 | Issue 3

May 2025

*Meeting at the Old
Auction House*

Following the well-attended Town Forum meeting on 23rd April at the Old Auction House, here is an update on the proposed local government reorganisation and several other key developments affecting Tunbridge Wells.

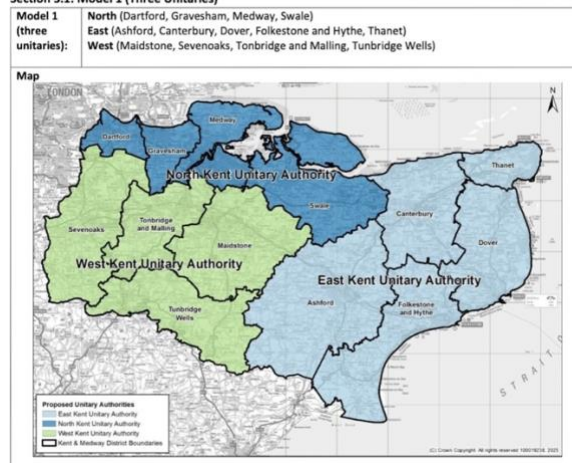
Local Government Reorganisation

As many of you will be aware, the Government's *Devolution White Paper* outlines a move toward replacing county and district councils with larger, more streamlined unitary authorities, each led by an elected mayor.

*Towards a Unitary
Authority*

Although Kent County Council (KCC) and Medway Council were not selected to join the initial wave of this programme, they have submitted an interim reorganisation plan, with a final proposal due by 28 November 2025. The key objective is to simplify governance by merging KCC and the 14 borough/district councils into three or four unitary authorities by 2027, with centralised services such as education, highways, planning, and waste management.

Section 3.1: Model 1 (Three Unitaries)



The functions of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) would be integrated into a new West Kent Unitary Authority, incorporating Tunbridge Wells, Sevenoaks, Tonbridge & Malling, and potentially Maidstone—serving a combined population of around 550,000. Assets and services run by TWBC would transfer to the new administrative centre of a West Kent Unitary Authority

Proposal for a Tunbridge Wells Town Council

In light of this potential reorganisation, TWBC has launched a Community Governance Review (CGR) to explore the creation of a Town Council for the six unparished wards in central Tunbridge Wells.

A Positive Step

A Town Council would offer several key benefits:

- Stronger local representation, ensuring residents continue to have a direct voice in shaping services and community initiatives post-reorganisation.
- Protection of the town's identity, heritage, and economic vision—particularly through support for tourism and regeneration.
- More responsive governance, with councillors focused solely on Tunbridge Wells.
- Access to dedicated funding, including the power to raise a local precept and apply for grants to fund.

CGR Timeline:

- 2 June – 21 September 2025: Awareness campaign and stakeholder briefings
- 22 September – 23 November 2025: Public consultation on draft recommendations
- February 2026: Final recommendations published
- May 2026: Community Governance Reorganisation Order enacted

We will be engaging with the council throughout the process and encourage all members to participate actively in the consultation stages to help shape the town's future.

Visit to Sevenoaks Town Council

Learning From Experience

The Town Forum Management Group have contacted town clerks from a dozen towns to gather insights into the role and functions of a town council. They held more in-depth discussions with five towns considered most comparable to Tunbridge Wells. As part of this research, members of the Town Forum were invited to visit Sevenoaks Town Council in April. While one might typically expect a town council to manage allotments, cemeteries, and local parks, Sevenoaks has gone far beyond that.

They have developed two new community centres and a business hub, restored a derelict building using Heritage Lottery funding, and saved the Stag Theatre, which now includes two cinemas, a small performance space, and a youth hub. The council also runs two cafés, maintains the iconic Vine cricket pitch, manages rugby pitches, and hosts events at the town bandstand.



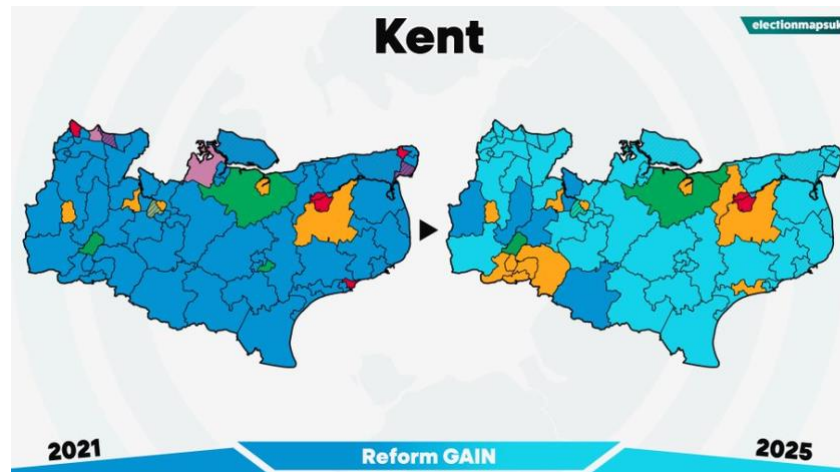
The councillors and officers at Sevenoaks were truly inspiring in demonstrating what can be achieved at the town council level.

Political Changes

What it means for Devolution

The recent Kent County Council elections brought significant change. Reform UK gained control of the council with 45 of the 81 seats. However, it's important to note that this shift is unlikely to alter the momentum toward devolution, though it may introduce some uncertainty in its implementation.

Locally, the Liberal Democrats achieved a clean sweep in all five Tunbridge Wells divisions. These councillors will play a critical role in shaping the proposed West Kent Unitary Authority.



If you wish to contact your Tunbridge Wells County Councillor to express your views or ask questions, here are their details:

East: Colin Sefton – Colin.Sefton@kent.gov.uk
 North: Mark Strafford Ellis – Mark.Ellis@kent.gov.uk
 South: Martin Dale Brice – Martin.brice@kent.gov.uk
 West: John Moreland – John.moreland@kent.gov.uk

Planning Update – Philips House

Application Refused

We are pleased to report that the planning application for the redevelopment of Philips House—proposing 38 townhouses and 6 flats opposite the Assembly Hall—has been refused.

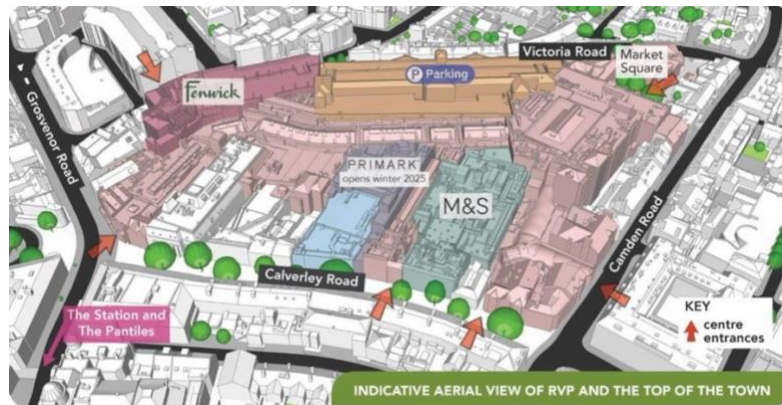


This outcome follows strong and detailed representations by the Town Forum Planning Group and the Tunbridge Wells Civic Society, concerning the design, scale, and local impact. Thank you to all who contributed. We will continue to monitor any future applications at this site.

Royal Victoria Place – The Future

Have your say

TWBC is conducting a public consultation on the future of Royal Victoria Place. As part of this, a workshop with Town Forum members is planned. Details will follow shortly.



In the meantime, you can share your views via the online survey at rvpfuture.com — open until 25 May 2025.

*What Should a
Town Council
Provide?*

And Finally, Town Forum Research

The management team is continuing its research into how town councils operate and has begun considering which assets and services might be appropriate for a future town council. It would be very interesting to find out what you think a Town Council for Tunbridge Wells should be responsible for. We will shortly be circulating a questionnaire and encourage you to share it as widely as possible within your networks. Your feedback will be essential to ensuring the future Town Council reflects the priorities and aspirations of our residents share



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM