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**Subject:** Devolution and next steps for KMEP

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## Summary

In December 2024, the Government published the [English Devolution White Paper](#). It set out the functions and funding that would be devolved to new strategic authorities, and the intention to reorganise existing local government councils into new unitary authorities with a population of 500,000 people or more. The paper included reference to the Government’s aspirations for each mayoral strategic authority to have a Local Growth Plan (LGP).

The Kent and Medway Economic Partnership (KMEP) acts as the local growth board for Kent and Medway, bringing together businesses, universities, further education colleges, and council leaders.

KMEP’s terms of reference were last updated in 2019. The economic growth landscape has changed significantly since this time. There is a need to revise the terms of reference and membership of KMEP to make it better align to the future devolution arrangements, and to better clarify its role and responsibilities during this interim period while we await this area’s inclusion in the devolution programme and the election of a mayor.

## Recommendation

KMEP board members are to comment on and endorse the proposed new membership for KMEP.

If the new arrangements are agreed, it is intended to launch a new recruitment call for private sector board members during the summer 2025.

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### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 On 16 December 2024, the Government published the [English Devolution White Paper](#).
- 1.2 A summary of the English Devolution White Paper can be found in Appendix A.
- 1.3 The Government invited every area in England to develop and submit a devolution proposal to them in January 2025.
- 1.4 Kent County Council and Medway Council worked closely with the 12 districts and decided to pursue the Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) option, one of three possible Strategic Authority models. [A letter](#) signed jointly by the Leaders of KCC and Medway Council was sent on 10 January 2025 to Jim McMahan OBE MP, Minister for Local Government and Devolution,

to formally request that Kent and Medway be included in the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP).

- 1.5 Kent and Medway [were not included in the Devolution Priority Programme](#) by the Government. The rationale for its non-inclusion is stated by Government to be the disparity in size between Kent and Medway, as well as lack of resource at national level to manage a larger devolution programme.
- 1.6 In addition to the creation of new strategic authorities, the Government's English Devolution White Paper set out its ambitions for local government reorganisation. The Government's preferences are:
  - All England to move to unitary authorities, and away from two-tier status. This will result in the abolition of county and district/borough councils.
  - All small unitary councils (with population below 500k) to be replaced with a larger unitary authority.
- 1.7 The Government has asked local areas to submit their proposals for new unitary authorities by 21 March 2025. A copy of Kent and Medway's submission is available [here](#)

## 2. Operating in a non-devolved area

- 2.1 Kent and Medway have a strong track record of project & programme delivery and collaboration between partners. Operating in a non-devolved area, while not ideal, does not prevent areas from collaborating on economic growth. There are a few questions that KMEP may wish to reflect on, however, to ensure that our area continues to grow and prosper alongside our devolved neighbours.
  - **How best to engage with central government?** – It will be important for Kent and Medway, supported by a strong local government to regularly highlight issues faced locally and seek to work closely with different government departments to push forward the economic growth agenda. Non-devolved areas sit outside the new engagement structures<sup>1</sup> so establishing a KMEP engagement and communication strategy would be beneficial.
  - **How best to operate in partnership with Government bodies?** – As the slides in Appendix A shows, the Government has said that strategic authorities will enjoy the benefits of new formal partnerships being established. Kent and Medway will need to progress similar work by making use of existing partnerships and structures, revising them where necessary and creating new groups to support an approach to, for example, the promotion and development of Strategic Place Partnerships and the production of joint long-term innovation strategies and investment pipelines.
  - **How to best make the case for Government funding?** – Through developing a project and investment pipeline, and by liaising with Government departments over individual funding streams, Kent and Medway will need to make the case for the roll out of government funding to support local priorities.
  - **How to access new responsibilities or devolved powers?** – The white paper set out new responsibilities and powers that a mayor would be able to access – for example, the mayor will have new rail-related powers. While the non-devolved areas will not automatically be

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<sup>1</sup> The Government has established the Council of Nations and Regions, the Mayoral Council, and the Leaders Council.

granted these new responsibilities, the Government’s decision does not preclude Kent and Medway from being active in these areas. For example, KMEP could seek to develop a relationship with Great British Railways.

- **How to set out our Local Growth ambitions?** – There is a new statutory requirement for every mayoral strategic authority (MSA) to produce a Local Growth Plan (LGP). Every foundation strategic authority (FSA) is to write a vision statement, that can be turned into a LGP, once the FSA becomes a MSA. The Government is not asking non-devolved areas to produce LGPs. That being said, the Kent and Medway Economic Framework is viewed positively by the Cities and Local Growth Unit within MHCLG/DBT. Work could be undertaken by KMEP and its partners to work up a new LGP – with a sector focus – to complement the existing KMEF and this could be submitted to Government (*more information on this proposal below*).
- **How does Kent and Medway develop an attractive business proposition to companies wishing to invest or expand within our area?** - Mayors will act as focal points to expound the benefits of their area and to attract new private-sector investors to a region. Locate in Kent (LiK) is contracted to provide inward investment services and develop a pipeline of opportunities. KMEP is already working with LiK to consider this question, but board members’ comments would be welcomed.

The core question for KMEP is: **what actions can we take at our local level to ensure that Kent and Medway are in the best position to deliver against the Government’s growth ambitions?**

We would be grateful to hear the views of the KMEP board members during our meeting to understand your thoughts.

### 3. Engagement and Communications Strategy

3.1 From a KMEP secretariat perspective, we would like to propose that the following actions are taken by KMEP and its partners:

- **6 month Engagement Strategy:** KMEP and its partners agree an engagement strategy.
- The table below shows the events and publication launches that we may want to concentrate on within a 6-month period.
- A question we would like to propose to the KMEP board is **who should act as the focal point for media engagement and government liaison? Where do KMEP board members have the strongest links into/with Ministers and Civil Servants?**
- To aid visibility into central government, we would foresee launching the following documents over the next 6-months to show we are a proactive region:

Date	Subject	Comment
May	Innovation Partnership formal launch event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Kent and Medway Innovation Partnership (KMIP) already exists, however, there is no publicity of this to date.</li> <li>• We could launch a new page on KMEP’s site explaining what the KMIP is and its focus sectors, and the universities could</li> </ul>

		host an initial meeting of the businesses interested in being part of the scheme.
June	Glossy version of pipeline of investible propositions*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Draft one of the investible propositions has been submitted.</li> <li>• The content of this document needs to be improved to include more private sector propositions.</li> <li>• The design of the document also needs to be improved, and Mid-Kent college has kindly agreed to use their design/graphics students to provide some work on this for free (Thanks Simon!).</li> </ul>
	KMEP Board Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will seek a business host for KMEP meeting on 24 June and invite the DBT Minister &amp; Senior Civil Servants down.</li> </ul>
	Kent Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kent Day is taking place on 2 June 25.</li> <li>• This is an event taking place at the House of Commons – its target audience is MPs, senior civil servants and other key stakeholders.</li> <li>• The pipeline of investible propositions could be launched at this event.</li> <li>• Also, key messaging from KMEP on its ambitions for local growth, and its progress on developing a Local Growth Plan could be shared – with a view to MPs being offered the opportunity for 1:1 follow-up meetings.</li> </ul>
July	Local Get Britain Working Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The DWP has tasked KCC/KMEP with producing a Local Get Britain Working Plan by July. A government minister could be invited to the county for its launch.</li> </ul>
August	N/A - MP recess	
September	Local Growth Plan*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• KMEP to launch its LGP, this could be through a formal launch event.</li> </ul>

#### 4. Local Growth Plan, Investor Proposition, Pipeline of Investments.

4.1 KMEP board members are asked to consider the **proposal in Appendix B**, which sets out the plan to develop a new draft **Local Growth Plan (LGP)** by September. Our present thinking is that the Kent & Medway Economic Framework (KMEF)(which sets out our thematic ambitions) is retained, and is complemented by the new LGP that has a sectoral focus. The KMEF will continue to provide a wider strategic growth vision for Kent and Medway, whereas the proposed LGP will be a much more focused document that identifies our unique high growth sectors and proposed interventions to support these, alongside an investment pipeline.

4.2 Later on in the agenda is a presentation on the work that could be undertaken by the LiK team working with the KMEP team to update draft one of the **investible propositions** (Appendix C) which has already been sent into Government.

4.3 Finally, another core piece of work that needs a task and finish group to develop, to be led by LiK, is to formulate what **our attractive business proposition** is to help market Kent and Medway to investors looking to locate and/or expand in this area. This is part of LiK's contract, and they will present on this to KMEP later in our meeting.

## 5. Being devolution ready – Amending KMEP's membership

5.1 KMEP acts as the current local growth board for Kent and Medway, bringing together businesses, universities, further education colleges, and council leaders. It is a private-public sector unincorporated association.

5.2 KMEP's terms of reference were last updated in 2019. The economic growth landscape has changed significantly since this time. There is a need to revise the terms of reference and membership of KMEP to make it better align to the future devolution arrangements and the Government's Invest 2035 strategy, and to better clarify its role and responsibilities during this interim period while we await this area's inclusion in the devolution programme and election of a mayor.

5.3 Please find below some initial thoughts on how the membership and terms of reference could be refreshed to underline how Kent and Medway navigate the next few months and years to make us 'devolution-ready'.

### Proposed new membership:

A membership table is included in Appendix D – which shows the current KMEP membership, a proposed interim membership model for your consideration today, and the provisional future membership for future consideration if Kent and Medway establish a mayoral strategic authority.

5.4 As Appendix D shows, the interim KMEP Board shall consist of circa 31 members, as follows:

- Private sector chairperson (1)
- Private sector vice-chairperson (to also act a Thematic Lead) (\*1)
- KMEF Thematic Leads (\*5)
- LGP Sector Leads (3/4 – to be confirmed, dependent on sectors in local growth plan)
- Representatives from private-sector membership or subscription organisations (2).  
Specifically, from the:
  - Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce (KICC)
  - Federation of Small Business (FSB)
- Inward investment & promotion (2):
  - Locate in Kent
  - Visit Kent
- County & Unitary Leaders (2)
- District & Borough Leaders (12)

- Higher education & KMIP representative (3)
- Further education representative selected by KFE (1)

5.5 For reference, the current membership of KMEP is 33 members, with 17 business members, 14 local authority leaders, and 2 education representatives.

5.6 As the local government reorganisation process continues, and devolution happens in due course, KMEP may wish to keep a watching brief on when to further evolve the membership model.

5.7 We are indebted to the private sector business members that serve on KMEP for giving up their time, knowledge, skills and expertise for free. While it is important that we reflect and go through recruitment for the board, it must be stressed that we are very much hoping that existing members will reapply. The interim KMEP Board composition aligning with the ambitions of KMEF and the potential forthcoming LGP is crucial to ensure there is an active role in delivery of Kent and Medway's strategic growth ambitions for board members.

#### Timeframe for moving towards new membership:

4.7 The proposal is that we move to KMEP interim membership from summer 2025, after a recruitment exercise for private sector board members.

#### **The purpose, role and responsibilities of KMEP**

5.8 The core ambition for KMEP is to drive forward economic growth in Kent and Medway.

5.9 Specifically, the proposed role for KMEP to consider is as follows:

##### **Business & Sector Representation -**

- KMEP, coupled with its sub-group, the Business Advisory Board (BAB), is to communicate market intelligence to KMEP partners.
- The proposal is that BAB is retained, but that additional members are sought to ensure representation from the key sectors identified in the county's proposed LGP and a more representative balance between small and large employers.

##### **Strategic advice and policy development -**

- KMEP to shape, define, endorse and monitor the strategic economic plans for Kent and Medway – which will include the LGP and the KMEF, including the evidence bases, and any successor documents.
- KMEP to liaise with partners that are developing key strategies, such as the Spatial Development Strategy, Local Transport Plan, Local Skills Improvement Plans, Local Power Plan, Regional Energy Strategic Plan, Local Nature Recovery Strategy, Local Get Britain Working Plans.
- KMEP to consider and develop strategic responses to new economic opportunities and challenges in Kent and Medway.
- KMEP to consider national and international best practice.

#### **Economic Strategy Delivery**

- Between meetings, KMEP board members (including thematic and sectoral leads) will lead on the actions to deliver against our strategic growth objectives, supported by the KMEP Secretariat.

### **Engagement and evidence base collation**

- KMEP to actively, deliberately and constructively engage with wider stakeholders and other regeneration organisations, including national and local partners such as: Government Departments, mayoral strategic authorities, all local authorities, third sector representatives, community interest groups, universities and research institutions in order to collect information which can be factored into decisions and recommendations.
- KMEP to provide and market a coherent growth offer in Kent – in liaison with the Growth Hubs, LiK and the Department for Business and Trade’s small business and trade strategies.

### **Advise on where to invest in the region / Promote the need for investment**

- Management of Growing Places Fund – KMEP providing an advisory role for project prioritisation.
- Working with LiK on inward investment.

### **Advocacy and Lobbying**

- KMEP to provide a strong, informed and independent voice for Kent and Medway businesses, education institutions, and local government at national and regional level.
- KMEP to represent the economic interests of Kent and Medway to central government.
- KMEP to champion successes within Kent and Medway, including bringing to the attention of Government local growth projects which should be recognised as innovative, or examples of best practice, and ensuring that stakeholders are able to make informed decisions on local growth matters.

## **6. Recommendation**

6.1 The Board to comment on and note the approach outlined regarding the:

- Engagement Strategy;
- Investor Proposition, and;
- Pipeline of Investments.

6.2 The Board to endorse the development of a draft Local Growth Plan for Kent and Medway.

6.3 The Board to endorse the proposed KMEP membership and roles and responsibilities.

## **APPENDICES**

- **Appendix A – English Devolution White Paper Summary Slides**
- **Appendix B – LGP Development Proposals**
- **Appendix C – Draft one of the investible propositions**
- **Appendix D – KMEP membership proposals**