



Minutes of online meeting of the Canterbury Forum on Thursday 26 June 2025 at 7.00-9.00 pm.

Present: Cllrs Jean Butcher (Chair), Alan Baldock, Michael Dixey, Paul Prentice and 27 members of the public

Apologies: Cllr Dane Buckman, Cllr Pat Edwards, Cllr Pip Hazelton, Hilary Brian

1. Minutes of previous meeting 13 February 2025

The Minutes were approved

2. Local Government Reorganisation

Update from Cllr Alan Baldock

Cllr Baldock said that since the submission of the interim proposals by all 14 councils in March, council leaders and officers had been working well together and discussions were on track for the more detailed submission, which would include the proposed geography of the new unitaries and the rationale for this, by the Government deadline of 28 November. The proposal would probably be for either 3 or 4 unitaries, possibly putting forward both options if no agreement was reached. The proposals would then be considered by the Government over the winter. Elections would take place for 'shadow' authorities in May 2027, leading to 'vesting' day in April 2028 when the new unitary authorities would replace the existing councils. The new KCC administration had asked for additional time but, as expected, the request had been rejected by the Minister.

Much of the work now going on was data gathering. Consultants had just been appointed to help with the work of disaggregation, identifying the differing needs in the different parts of the county and assessing how these needs were to be met in the new structure. The final decision on the new structure would be made by the Secretary of State

Another area of work was that of education and communication. Cllr Baldock said that CCC would be working on a public awareness campaign over the summer, and he asked everyone present to encourage their groups and organisations to make contact with him. He was keen to talk to meetings and to explain what was being done and why, and the pros and cons of the changes.

Discussion: Consultation and engagement

Oliver Waldron asked how decisions would be made about facilities such as libraries which are currently Kent-wide. Cllr Baldock said that there was nothing to prevent some services still operating across the boundaries of the unitary authorities. Final decisions about the breakdown between different parts of the county would be made by the Secretary of State, primarily on the basis of viability, taking account of the huge differences between the levels of deprivation in different parts of the county, and the need for fairness. East Kent also faced particular responsibilities with its coastline and issues such as border crossings, and he hoped that this would be recognised with additional government funding.

Cllr Baldock reiterated that CCC councillors needed to know local residents' concerns, and suggested that September/October would be a good time to arrange public meetings. He assumed that people's basic questions would be asking what was happening and how they would be affected by it. Peta Boucher said that these would presumably be informal discussions rather than a formal consultation. Cllr Baldock confirmed this and said that formal consultation would come at a later stage.

Rosemary Walters said that peoples' two main concerns were likely to be "Will it cost more?" and "What will happen to my democratic vote?" Cllr Baldock said that residents would elect their councillors as at present. Each unitary would probably have about 100 councillors, and the recommended population size for unitaries was 5/600,000, so each councillor would be likely to represent about 5/6000 people. The existing KCC electoral divisions would probably be used initially, but the Boundary Commission would subsequently be able to review these.

Discussion: Local communities, town and parish councils

Cllr Baldock said that the White Paper had emphasised the importance of local democracy at a level below that of unitary authorities, and the Secretary of State was mindful of the benefits of town and parish councils, but these needed to be large enough to act effectively. Some of the parishes served by parish councils in East Kent were very small, whereas they tended to be substantially larger in West Kent, so thought should be given to amalgamating parish councils. Discussion was also needed to identify the areas which could be served by new town councils in Canterbury, Whitstable and Herne Bay, and there might be a case for also creating new parish councils for the outlying areas. The submission in November would be an opportunity to flag up a commitment to democratic bodies at the most local level. The creation of a Harrogate town council, which happened after the creation of the North Yorkshire unitary authority in 2023, was a possible model to follow. However, the conversation needed to start before the creation of the new Kent unitaries.

Alan Armstrong warned against relegating the outlying areas of the city/towns to separate parish councils and cutting them off from the place on which they were focused.

Tim Carlyle asked who would set the parameters for the degree of autonomy assigned to bodies at the most local level. Cllr Baldock said that Jim McMahon as Secretary of State would oversee this and would see it as an important matter but not a first priority.

Graham Cox asked whether KCC might be making a case for the whole of Kent to become a single unitary authority. Cllr Baldock said that the advice from Government was clear that the recommended population size for a unitary authority was 5/600,000. KCC was only one of the 14 existing councils involved in the process, and the county-wide option was not being considered by the other 13.

Jan Pahl suggested that following the Harrogate example and waiting for two years before having a Community Governance Review was too long to wait. Cllr Baldock said there could be interim arrangements, as had happened in some places, such as neighbourhood forums in which councillors of the unitary authority were included. This would allow time for a thorough process of creating new bodies.

Oliver Waldron asked what place there would be for the Canterbury BID in the new structure. Cllr Baldock said that it would be able to continue as at present, and appropriate arrangements could be made to determine who the BID worked with.

Richard Norman asked whether concurrent function funding could be a useful mechanism for devolving functions to town and parish councils. Alan Armstrong said that this was something to be wary of, as parish councils had had some functions, such as looking after parks and gardens, devolved to them along with funding which had then been steadily reduced.

Discussion: CCC and KCC legacy and assets to be protected

Cllr Baldock said that CCC and the Cabinet in particular had spent a lot of time looking at what it wanted to achieve in its remaining time. The Government would be scrutinising all decisions on spending and disposal of assets between now and vesting day to make sure that this was done responsibly and sustainably, and that if, for instance, a property was bequeathed to an organisation they would be in a position to look after it properly. A positive example was the use of the Levelling Up Fund and the work on the castle and the Poor Priests Hospital, for instance, as an opportunity to create a valuable legacy. Another good example was the recent agreement to transfer a property owned by the Foresters Hall Trust to the Whitstable Community Museum. CCC would publish lists of decisions about assets as the process continued.

3. Levelling Up Fund – Connected Canterbury

Cllr Baldock provided an update on this. Work on the new Westgate Square was now quite well advanced. Past experience had indicated the importance of keeping one lane open all the time through Westgate Towers. The work was slow because of utilities which in the past had been installed close to the road surface, necessitating strengthening of the surface. The impressive restoration of the Poor Priests' Hospital was now nearly complete and it was hoped that there might be more public access to the building. Work on the Castle was transforming it into an excellent new attraction. Other work in progress included the Three Cities Garden and the Dane John Gardens.

Cllr Prentice added that up to date information could be found on [the dedicated pages of the Council web site](#).

Oliver Waldron said that it appeared, regrettably, that the various projects would result in a net loss of cycle parking spaces. Cllr Baldock said that as no tender had been received for the proposed cycle hire scheme, this might free up some space for cycle parking.

Alan Armstrong asked why the project was limited to the city of Canterbury. Cllr Baldock said that this was a decision made by the previous CCC administration.

4. Any other business

Oliver Waldron asked for an update on the move toward becoming accredited as a Living Wage Employer. Cllr Baldock said that all council employees were paid a living wage and all new contracts with other employers required payment of a living wage, but CCC was not in a position to cancel the few existing contracts with employers which did not meet the conditions. Oliver said it would be good if CCC could apply for full accreditation on the basis of having a plan for all its contractors to be living wage employers.

Cllr Baldock provided the following brief news items:

- Cabinet had recently agreed to go out to consultation on a new Net Zero Action Plan. He hoped that residents would respond to this and asked for it to be mentioned in the minutes.
- CCC's Open Spaces Policy had now been approved and could therefore feed into the Local Plan.
- The revised draft Local Plan would go out for a short Regulation 18 consultation in September, focused solely on the changes. There would then be a short regulation 19 Consultation in Spring 2026. Responses to the consultations on previous drafts would all go forward.
- The Secretary of State had recently announced a commitment to reform the local government funding system, with fairer funding for councils, and multi-year settlements.

5. Date of next meeting

This would be in October, probably around the middle of the month but the date would take account of further developments in the matters discussed in the present meeting.