

Meeting Cabinet
Portfolio Area Leader of the Council
Date 14 January 2026



LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION AND LOCAL ELECTIONS 2026

REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

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NON-KEY DECISION

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 Following the publication of the English Devolution White Paper in December 2024, the Government has indicated its intent to proceed with the restructuring of two-tier local government across England by April 2028. In addition to the submission of proposals from six county areas in the 'Devolution Priority Programme' in September 2025, 134 Councils from 14 county areas were invited to submit proposals for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in their areas, by a deadline of 28 November 2025. An estimated 53 different proposals were submitted by 28 November 2025, including proposals submitted by Hertfordshire Councils including Stevenage Borough Council.
- 1.2 On the 18 December 2025, the Minister for Local Government and Homelessness wrote to the 64 local Councils in the 14 county areas where local elections are scheduled in May 2026 ("the Letter"). The Letter invites councils to set out their views on the potential postponement of their local election in May 2026, whether doing this would allow them to be better equipped to deliver local government reorganisation.

- 1.3 This report confirms that it is an 'Executive' function to respond to the Letter and invites Cabinet to consider its response to the invitation.
- 1.4 The Leader has consented to the report being dealt with as a matter of urgency as the letter received from the Government had a response deadline of 15 January and this is the first opportunity for Cabinet to consider the matter. Further advice and FAQ's had also been published on 6 January to inform preparation of this report, along with legal advice on the decision making process.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Cabinet is requested to:

- 2.1 Note the letter from the Minister of State for Local Government and Homelessness on 18 December 2025, inviting councils in reorganisation areas where elections are planned for 2026 to give their views on potential postponement of local elections in their areas.
- 2.2 Agree one of the following as the preferred response, either:
 - a) Not to respond to the letter.
 - b) Respond with comments on the capacity to manage the transition to new unitary authorities by April 2028 and requests that local elections scheduled for May 2026 be postponed by one year.
 - c) Respond in support of local elections proceeding as planned in May 2026.
 - d) Respond clarifying that the decision on whether to postpone local elections by one year or proceed as scheduled is a matter for the Secretary of State
- 2.3. Subject to 2.2 above, delegate authority to the Leader of the Council to submit a response to the Minister's invitation by 15 January 2026.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 In February 2025, the then Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution issued a statutory invitation to all councils in two-tier areas and neighbouring small unitary councils to develop proposals for unitary local government. Seven county-level areas were invited to respond as part of a Devolution Priority Programme and submit proposals for Local Government Reorganisation by the end of September 2025.
- 3.2 Stevenage Borough Council, along with the other 10 local authorities in Hertfordshire, were included in the next phase of Local Government Reorganisation. Councils from 14 different county areas, covering an estimated 134 local authorities, were invited to submit proposals for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in their areas by 28 November 2025.
- 3.3 Cabinet met on 18 November 2025 and agreed its preferred option for Local Government Reorganisation, to be submitted to Government as part of an overall Hertfordshire submission by 28 November 2025.
- 3.4 Through the English Devolution White Paper, subsequent Ministerial Statements and guidance, the Government has indicated its intention for new

local authorities to be elected to in shadow form in May 2027 and to be fully established in April 2028 under ‘the most ambitious timeline’.

- 3.5 On 18 December 2025, the Minister of State for Local Government and Homelessness wrote to the 63 local Councils in the 14 county areas where local elections are scheduled in May 2026. The Letter invited councils to set out their views on the potential postponement of their local election in May 2026, whether doing this would allow them to better deliver local government reorganisation. MHCLG and the LGA have published Frequently Answered Question in response to a series of general queries related to May 2026 election postponement and can be found via: [Devolution and LGR FAQs: MHCLG | Local Government Association](#).
- 3.6 Through the Letter and a Ministerial Statement, the Minister confirmed that the Government remains committed to the indicative timetable that was published in July 2025, that sees elections to new councils in May 2027 and those councils going live in April 2028.
- 3.7 It recognised that LGR is a complex process and a significant number of proposals have been submitted for consideration with a relatively short timescale to design, transition and implement new unitary councils. The Letter also set out that the Government expects to undertake public consultation on LGR proposals for a period of seven weeks, from 5 February 2026.
- 3.8 Minister McGovern highlights within the Letter that a number of Councils have indicated there are constraints facing the sector, and that reorganisation also introduces additional work on top of existing challenges. The Minister notes that there have been some concerns expressed over the capacity to deliver a smooth and safe transition to new councils as well as running resource-intensive elections to councils who may be shortly abolished. A full copy of the letter is attached as Appendix A.
- 3.9 The Letter states that previous Governments have taken decisions to postpone local elections in areas contemplating and undergoing local government reorganisation to allow councils to focus their time and energy on the process.
- 3.10 The decision on whether to proceed with, or postpone, local elections is a matter for the Secretary of State who would confirm any postponement via an Order.
- 3.11 The correspondence to Councils suggests that the Secretary of State will use a locally-led approach and listen to local concerns. Minister McGovern has set out that councils are in the best position to judge the impact of potential postponements on their area, their capacity and any other relevant factors. Noting that capacity may vary in different local councils, and that local leaders are best placed to make assessments on the impact of LGR and potential postponements.
- 3.12 Councils are invited to respond by midnight on 15 January 2026 to set out their views on the postponement of your local election and if they consider this could release essential capacity to deliver local government reorganisation in an area and so allow reorganisation to progress effectively.
- 3.13 An initial public statement from the Leader of the Council to the Minister’s elections announcements was published on the Council’s website on 19

December, 2025 and can be found here: <https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/news-and-events/news/mhclg-elections-announcement-response-statement>.

Previous Local Government Reorganisations and Local Elections

- 3.14 A Ministerial Statement by the then Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution, Jim McMahon, in February 2025 noted that between 2019 and 2022, the previous government legislated to postpone 17 local council elections for one year during preparatory local government reorganisation work. For example, between 2019-2022, the previous government postponed elections in Buckinghamshire, Cumbria, North Yorkshire, Northamptonshire, Somerset, and Weymouth and Portland. In addition, research suggests that in some of the affected areas, some district-level elections were not due in the period of time between proposals being submitted to Government and decisions taken, because this period of time fell in a non-district election year.

Stevenage Borough Council elections

- 3.15 Stevenage Borough Council held all out elections in May 2024, following an Electoral Review and subsequent adoption of new Ward boundaries. May 2026 will therefore be the first cycle of borough elections by thirds (or 13 electable seats), since those all out elections in May 2024.
- 3.16 This means that Councillors who represent the seats due for election in May 2026, will have served a 2 year term by May 2026.

Assessing capacity and local impacts

- 3.17 The Secretary of State will consider the position of each council individually, weighing up the evidence received. This means that different decisions may be taken for different councils within the same area, depending on the representations received.
- 3.18 Councils are asked to make clear where, in their judgement, the capacity and resourcing issues in their area could impact their capacity to deliver local government reorganisation, to the Government published timescales.
- 3.19 Councils are asked to make any request for a postponement explicit, as this will of course be relevant in deciding whether postponement is necessary for a particular council.
- 3.20 If a Council does not make an explicit request or provide clear views and evidence in respect of their judgment on capacity, then the Secretary of State will take that into account and consider relevant evidence but it will clearly make the decision making process more difficult and the Secretary of State will be less likely to Order a delay, given the locally-led approach taken. It is ultimately up to councils how or whether they respond.
- 3.21 As mentioned earlier in the report, the decision on whether to postpone or proceed with local elections is solely a decision for the Secretary of State, not for a local authority. After the 15 January 2026 deadline, the Secretary of State will consider the position of each council individually, weighing up the views and evidence received. If the Secretary of State decides to postpone an election, legislation will be brought forward as soon as is practicable.

- 3.22 There is no single definition of capacity in this context, and there are potentially a number of factors for the Cabinet to consider. Arrangements were put in place to increase capacity during the recent 'submission' stage of the LGR process, including seconding a senior officer to lead the SBC project team, access to other internal team resources, extensive engagement with Members including Cabinet, wide consultation and work with local stakeholders.
- 3.23 Councils in Hertfordshire have been asked by the Herts Chief Executives Co-ordinating Group (CECG) to make budgetary provision to support LGR transition work. In response, the Draft General Fund Budget report to the January Cabinet will recommend allocating £560K in 2026/27 and a further £500K in 2027/28. These allocations are intended to enable preparatory work to commence in line with the timetable set out by the government, which anticipates the establishment of new unitary authorities by April 2028.
- 3.24 It is important to note that these recommended amounts do not represent the full transitional costs estimated in the three model submissions. Instead, they provide an initial allowance to begin essential planning and implementation activities. Further financial provision will be required as the programme develops and more detailed costings become available.
- 3.25 **Local Government Reorganisation submission.** The published submission from Hertfordshire authorities to Government (pgs120 – 121) highlighted several key transition risks and mitigations for this complex transition. This includes the extract below:
- **Effective leadership:** if there is a lack of clarity and efficiency on the leadership and decision-making arrangements during the transition process, this may delay implementation activities, increase costs and prevent effective oversight.
 - **Service continuity:** the existing Authorities deliver many vital services, often to vulnerable people. If transition and transformation do not minimise disruption, it may prevent the effective delivery of services and harm public confidence in the new Authorities.
 - **Complexity and pace of change:** lessons learnt from other similar programmes show that it is critical to start early, plan effectively and demonstrate strong leadership. Failure to do so will lead to time delays, cost overrun and an impact on service quality.
 - **Workforce capacity and morale:** the proposal will lead to significant changes for people across the existing organisations. While we believe the future offers significant opportunities, we recognise that if change is not managed effectively and the workforce not sufficiently engaged – this may damage staff morale, disrupt services and limit retention of the relevant skills and roles for the new organisation.
 - **Financial risk:** changes in the financial context either through wider economic changes, or specific changes in areas such as council tax base or transition costs result in the cost of LGR being higher than planned.
- 3.26 **Corporate Priorities.** The Council adopted a new Making Stevenage Better Corporate Plan 2024 – 2027, setting a range of ambitions and projects for the

town. A full version of the Plan is available online: [Appendix A - Making Stevenage Even Better 2024-2027](#). It includes projects such as the delivery of a new sports and leisure facility, commencing the Station Gateway project, investment into skills, ongoing delivery of the town centre regeneration programme, delivery of 1,000 new council homes including regeneration of the Oval, £249m investment into Councils homes, work in neighbourhoods, tackling climate change and delivering savings. Senior Leadership Team (SLT) capacity has been allocated to ensure the successful delivery of this ambitious programme of work.

- 3.27 **Delivery of local elections.** The Council has made appointments to the roles of Returning Officer (RO) and Electoral Registration Officer (ERO). The RO plays a central role in the democratic process, with their functions to ensure elections are administered effectively in accordance with the law, and that the experience of voters and those standing for election is a positive one. Their role is undertaken with impartiality to maintain the integrity of the election process. The duties of the RO are separate to their duties as a local government officer, and the RO is not responsible to the local authority but is directly accountable to the courts as an independent statutory office holder. The Council provides full support to the RO to deliver impartial and well managed elections. This is supported by a skilled Elections Team, with a full project plan and risk register in place, and regular oversight from the RO and Deputy Returning Officers (DROs).
- 3.28 A number of the Council's senior leadership team are anticipated to be actively involved in the delivery of local elections alongside the delivery of the Local Government Reorganisation programme.
- 3.29 As the Secretary of State has made no decisions regarding the timing of local elections in 2026, planning for the effective management of elections continues. Stevenage Borough Council has supported an application to participate in a Flexible Voting Pilot, which aims to provide greater choice and convenience for voters. However, at the point this report was published, the Secretary of State had not yet confirmed whether the pilot will proceed, with the necessary Statutory Orders intended to be in place and signed in January.
- 3.30 MHCLG has advised that Members may retire whenever they choose and their retirement would trigger a by-election in the usual way. Where a vacancy is to be filled at the May 2026 election, under the 'six month' rule, any Order to postpone those elections will also provide for the filling of such a vacancy.

4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

- 4.1 As set out in the recommendations of this report (section 2.2) there are a range of options available.
- 4.2 It is recommended that Cabinet consider the four options outlined in this report and agree on its preferred response. This decision will ensure clarity on the Council's position regarding the timing of local elections and the approach to managing the transition to new unitary authorities.

- 4.3 A decision on whether to postpone local elections or proceed as planned is solely a matter for the Secretary of State. An alternative option to responding to the request, whether to note capacity concerns and request a delay, or to support elections proceeding, would be to provide no response at all. While the letter of 18 December 2025 states that the Secretary of State is only minded to make an Order to postpone elections for one year for those councils that raise capacity concerns, any response or non-response from the Cabinet will not be binding on the Secretary of State.

5 IMPLICATIONS

Financial Implications

- 5.1 The cost of holding local elections in 2026 is estimated to be £155K based on the proposed 2026/27 budgets. However, given the timing of this and the expected Secretary of State's decision, some costs have been incurred before any formal determination is made.
- 5.2 In relation to Flexible Voting Pilots, funding for costs associated with the pilots will be provided by MHCLG. Indicative costings have already been submitted to MHCLG, and further costs will be identified through ongoing discussions between the Returning Officer and MHCLG should the local elections proceed in 2026.
- 5.3 As set out in paragraph 3.23, the Draft General Fund Budget report to the January 2026 Cabinet will recommend allocating £560K in 2026/27 and £500K in 2027/28 to support the transition to a new unitary authority. These amounts do not represent the full costs outlined in the three Hertfordshire submissions but provide an initial allowance to enable work to continue in line with the Government's timescale for LGR.

Legal Implications

- 5.4 The division between executive and non-executive functions are provided for by the Local Government Act 2000 ("LGA 2000") and the Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations ("the Functions Regulations"). Subject to any provision made by the LGA 2000 or subsequent enactments, all functions not specified in the Functions Regulations are the responsibility of the executive. The Letter invites authorities which consider that a postponement of elections is desirable, because of concerns about lack of sufficient capacity to manage both elections and the reorganisation process that the same time to set out their views to that effect by midnight on 15th January 2026.
- 5.5 The Council's Monitoring Officer sought urgent leading counsel (KC) advice and to whether responding to the Letter requesting a postponement is an executive or a non-executive decision. Counsel's view was that this would be an Executive decision. The power to make an order postponing (or changing the year of) elections under s87 of the LGA 200 is a power for the Secretary of State. There is no statutory provision which requires an affected authority to have requested the change.

- 5.6 In principle, anyone at all could make such a request, or the Secretary of State could act entirely of their own motion. It is simply as a matter of policy that the Secretary of State has in this instance indicated that he is likely to look for a request to have been made by the authority before considering the exercise of the s 87 power. The decision to postpone or proceed with the elections in May 2026 is solely a matter for the Secretary of State. Counsel has advised that they cannot see that in making a request for a postponement the Council would not be discharging any of the specific non-executive functions specified in the Functions Regulations.
- 5.7 Counsel has also advised that they do not consider that a decision to request a postponement of elections is itself key decision within the meaning of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012. This is because the Council is not taking the decision to postpone the elections, as said above, this is a decision which will be taken by the Secretary of State.

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) Implications

- 5.8 All councils anticipate further information on election arrangements in 2026, 2027, and 2028 related to the ongoing Local Government Reorganisation process.

Risk Implications

- 5.9 Risks associated with the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) transition are detailed in section 3.25 of this report. Where mitigations are available, these have been set out within the Hertfordshire LGR submission to Government. These measures aim to address potential challenges relating to governance, service continuity, financial stability, and workforce capacity during the transition period.
- 5.10 As is standard practice at elections, a comprehensive project plan and risk register will be in place, taking into account the additional arrangements resulting from the Council's involvement in the flexible voting pilots. When any election takes places, the effective management of an election is a priority for the RO, supported by the resources of the Council.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- BD1 Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan 2024 – 2027
<https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/about-the-council/plans-and-performance/corporate-plan-making-stevenage-even-better-2024-2027>
- BD2 Hertfordshire Local Government Reorganisation proposal: [Hertfordshire LGR Proposal.pdf](#)
- BD3 LGA/MHLCG FAQs: [Devolution and LGR FAQs: MHCLG | Local Government Association.](#)

APPENDICES

- A Letter from Minister for Local Government and Homelessness, 18 December 2025