

'The Switzerland of local government' has no plans to create merged West Kent council

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Four local authorities in east Kent will this week discuss plans to become one large district council

There are no plans to replicate the planned east Kent merged council in the west of the county, a local authority leader has confirmed.

The town halls of Canterbury, Dover, Shepway and Thanet are planning to join forces to create one large district council within the next two years.

At simultaneous meetings tomorrow night, councillors will vote on whether they want to take the process to the next stage, which would be a period of public engagement.

However, leader of Sevenoaks District Council, Peter Fleming, confirmed **no such discussions had taken place to create a west Kent council with Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge and Malling**, because he felt such a large authority would be too big to provide true localism.

"I'm a confirmed localist," he told Kent News. "If you go anywhere else in the world and look at local government, there are more powers and it's a system that really delivers locally. "The east Kent districts have done a considerable amount of work together over the last few years and they're working out what's right for them. "It's their solution to what is a big issue facing local government and it will be interesting to watch the debate. "For me personally, I think it's quite a big area, and those four districts are very different and diverse, but they believe it will find savings and work for their communities, and it would be wrong for me to say whether that's right or wrong."

Cllr Fleming said such a move would be unlikely to work in the west of the county, with the district bordering the London boroughs of Bromley and Bexley, Wealden in East Sussex and Tandridge in Surrey, as well as areas in Kent.

"I always say we are like the Switzerland of local government because we have eight borders, but only four of those are against other Kent areas," he said. "Therefore, half the way we're looking out is not towards Kent and that changes your outlook. "We have residents who go to London every day so they're looking north, rather than east, which is why there aren't any plans for a west Kent council. "However, we've approached Kent County Council and asked how we can work better within the current structure, and Tonbridge and Malling and Tunbridge Wells are doing the same. "We've spoken about KCC pressures and we think there's lots of things districts can do in terms of helping keep people out of hospital and getting them out of hospital and back home, for example."

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