

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

SELECT COMMITTEE - ACCESSING DEMOCRACY

MINUTES of a meeting of the Select Committee - Accessing Democracy held at Wantsum Room, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Tuesday, 15 June 2010.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen, Mr D L Brazier, Mr W A Hayton, Mr S J G Koowaree and Mr R Tolputt

ALSO PRESENT: Mr A H T Bowles and Mr A J King, MBE

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms D Fitch (Assistant Democratic Services Manager (Policy Overview)) and Mr P D Wickenden (Overview, Scrutiny and Localism Manager)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

1. Election of Chairman for the meeting

(Item. 1)

RESOLVED that Mr D Brazier be elected Chairman for the meeting.

2. Select Committee - Accessing Democracy - progress monitoring report

(Item. 2)

(1) Mr Wickenden and Mr King introduced a report which updated the Select Committee on the general progress that had been made in this area since the Select Committee had submitted their report to the County Council. .

(2) Mr Wickenden explained that this area of work was cross cutting and there was no project lead for it. The progress report had been co-ordinated in Democratic Services. It was important that a project lead was identified to progress the area of work. He explained that the minutes from this meeting would be submitted to the Corporate Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 1 July 2010. The update would form part of the report to County Council in July 2010 on the progress with recommendations from all Select Committees.

(3) The Committee discussed the progress made on each of the 17 recommendations. Mr King, Mr Bowles and Mr Wickenden answered specific questions on the action taken to date and action proposed:-

Recommendation 1

(4) Mr Wickenden stated that a meeting of the Member Information Member and Officer Group was being held on 15 June 2010 which would contribute to some of the strands of this recommendation. A key issue was way in which the culture of the organisation needed to develop, and proposals such as Member and Officer shadowing opportunities could assist with this.

(5) Members discussed the speed at which new methods of communication being developed and the importance of remembering that social communication

tools such as twitter and facebook may have a very short lifespan. Technology whilst being an important communication tool would not solve all of Members information and communication needs.

(6) Mr King stated that the County Council could not ignore any means of communication that the public wanted to use.

(7) Members referred to the different ways in which "Local Boards" engage with young people in their area.

Recommendation 2

(8) Mr King stated that there was likely to be a change in the way in which consultation was viewed by the new government. He referred to the Draft Community Engagement Strategy which was due to be considered at Corporate Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 1 July 2010 this would include a coherent criteria for consultation across the authority. A new model report was due to be considered by Chief Officers Group in the next few weeks.

(9) In relation to participation techniques, different methods were currently being explored through the various models of community engagement being piloted across the County. Member would be consulted on a number of matters after the summer recess including participation techniques, the work of Overview and Scrutiny and Member use of Gateways. The development of the Scrutiny role of Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committees and the making of recommendations that may be referred to Cabinet was one of a range of initiatives currently being developed.

Recommendation 3

(10) Members discussed the training that they had attended. There was a view that some training was presented at a superficial level and there was a need to practise the skills that had been learned. Mr King asked that a meeting be arranged with Mr Wickenden, Mr Brazier, Mrs Cooper, Mrs Ingleton and himself to discuss the concerns raised regarding the adequacy of Member Training.

(11) Regarding the Members Development Charter, Mr King stated that the inspection was due to be carried out in September 2010. Members were currently producing their Personal Development Plans, supported by officers. He was confident that KCC would achieve the Members Development Charter in the autumn.

Recommendation 4

(12) Mr King confirmed that the 'communication tool kit' for Members had been produced and was due to be circulated to all Members shortly.

Recommendation 5

(13) Mr King referred to the link between Local Democracy week and the 100 days campaign. He encouraged all Members to go into secondary schools and talk to young people about the excitement of politics.

(14) Members gave examples of the way that they had engaged with some of their local schools. The importance of having a two way dialogue with schools to ensure that the maximum benefit was obtained from these visits for the young people was emphasised. Also the use of supporting audio visual material for these visits was mentioned. It was important that at national and local level advantage was taken of the ground swell of interest amongst young people in politics generated by the general election debates.

Recommendation 6

(15) The importance of the citizenship pack being in an easy read form was emphasised. Also mentioned was the importance of engaging adults with learning disabilities to ensure that they were able to participate in the democratic process.

Recommendation 7

(16) Mr Wickenden explained that some of the work on this area had been awaiting the upgrading of KCC's website.

Recommendation 8

(17) Mr King referred to the need to review Marketing and Communication across the county council. One of the areas under consideration would be the effective and efficient use of promotional DVD's.

Recommendation 9

(18) Mr King referred Members to the draft Community Engagement Strategy which would include these issues.

Recommendation 10

(19) Mr King stated that the technology for video conferencing had improved over since the Select Committee report. However, in order to get the best results the equipment at both ends needed to be of a high standard.

Recommendation 11

(20) Mr King explained that there had been a delay in implementing "have your say" due to a number of factors including the end of the Kent TV contract and changes to the website.

(21) Members reinforced the importance of ensuring that there was public confidence in the County Councils consultations process.

(22) There was discussion on the use of blogs. Although they could be a useful tool they only appealed to a limited section of the public, it should be recognised that they were only one of methods of engaging with the public. People would use the method of a range of communication that there were most comfortable with and found most effective.

(23) In relation to the challenge of engaging with the community, a Member referred to the local radio station established by the Marlowe Academy and the invitation to Local Board Members to have a weekly slot.

Recommendation 12

(24) Mr Bowles referred to the successful webcasting of the Gravesham Neighbourhood Forum. Mr Wickenden confirmed that the new webcast contract contained a requirement to provide equipment to webcast meeting in external venues.

Recommendation 13

(25) It was noted that this recommendation was being progressed by the Head of Communications & Media Centre.

Recommendation 14

(26) The Committee noted the ongoing action being taken to progress recommendation.

Recommendation 15

(27) The Committee noted the achievement of this recommendation.

Recommendation 16

(28) Mr King referred to the models of community engagement pilots being undertaken in district council areas, the outcome from these would be reported to Members in the autumn. He referred to a group of 3 District Council Leaders, chaired by Mr Bowles was looking at refreshing the Kent Commitment.

(29) Members discussed County Council relationships with both District and Parish Councils, including the potential opportunity for regional funding to move down to lower tiers of local government.

Recommendation 17

(30) Mr King referred to the participatory budgeting events being arranged for 2010-11. This was part of transforming the culture leading to greater engagement of people in making wider choices in the years ahead.

(31) RESOLVED that the progress made on the recommendations be noted and that consideration be given to identifying a lead officer to project manage the recommendations from the Review.