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To: Corporate Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 13 January 2011

Subject: Open Kent

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary

This report provides Members with an overview of the Open Kent project and an update on progress ¹.

Introduction

Open Kent is a powerful and innovative online tool that enables users to find, download, evaluate, map and visualise information and data owners to upload, share and compare it across the partnership in a cost effective and joined up manner. Open Kent will be accessed via a website that will be linked to each Kent Connects partner's open data site on their own website. It is a system that will provide organisations and customers easy access to a wide range of publically available data in a simple and secure way. It will enable users to intuitively navigate their way through complex data sets which they can analyse to produce bespoke solutions to their information needs. It will also provide the platform to help Kent Connects partners develop and implement a coherent approach to sharing and comparing both local and national public information across the County.

Although similar to data.gov in as much as both are data storage and publishing systems, Open Kent offers the user greater opportunities to manipulate and visualise the information as well as being able to access it from a simple browser interface. Being catalogued the information is far easier to find and share.

Its development will be staged. Key milestones as follows:-

- Completion of the back-end implementation – 31st January
- User testing completed – 28th February
- Go live – 15th April
- Engagement events – May- July
- Pilot project completion – 30th September
- Review and transition – October

¹ As initially outlined in the Cabinet paper dated 13 September 2010 'Transparency Programme: How we are spending your money.'

Background

Open Kent was initially developed as a pilot concept by KCC's Technology Transformation Team after they had won the national 'Innovate 08' award. In September 2010, the development of the original concept to a fully fledged trial was approved by the Kent Connects Strategic Board. It is now being driven forward through this wider partnership that includes all the local authorities in the County, Kent Police and Kent Fire and Rescue. Funding has been awarded to enable the concept to be fully developed and trialled for a year by all partners. In addition, the Open Kent Steering Group is working with the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Cabinet Office as well as data.gov and the Local Public Data Panel in order to look at how the system can be integrated more widely and support broader thinking on the national Transparency Agenda.

Open Kent is being further developed so that the system will:-

- **Simplify** the process for managing data
- **Allow** information & intelligence to be shared across organisations
- **Visualise** the data for multiple audiences
- **Empower** users to take control of local information
- **Encourage** community engagement
- **Deliver** efficiencies and rationalises processes

For the public, Open Kent aims to be the source of Kent public sector and other open data in local and central government data stores such as www.data.gov.uk, as well as the technology platform to make use of it. For data owners, Open Kent will allow users to link their data to enable them to access and manipulate it.

Kent Connects role

Kent Connects is a countywide ICT partnership. It was recognised that Open Kent offered numerous benefits for all partners including:-

- reducing the need for each local authority to either develop or buy their own solution
- re-using the technology
- increasing joined up working
- significantly reducing development costs
- ensuring that the data is made available to the same standards and in the same way.

The proposal for the further development of Open Kent was agreed in September and a working group, championed by David Lindsay (Maidstone Borough Council), was established with members from KCC, Maidstone, Medway and Tunbridge Wells.

Three key strands are being developed. They are:-

- a. further development of the technology to ensure that it is robust, stable and secure. The team is working with IBM to develop the tools for the next stage of Open Kent and shape the proposal to franchise the system to other public bodies
- b. understanding the data requirements, accessibility issues and user needs. This will be completed through research and a series of user testing workshops. Participants will include staff, Members and others.
- c. training and engagement as it is clear that although the tools have been simplified to make access and usage as easy as possible there remains an element of 'training' in order to maximise benefits for all users. This is currently in the form of on-line FAQ's although there is a review of other, more innovative options. In addition, it is important that as many data owners 'feed' the system as possible as well as making potential users aware of the benefits of Open Kent. This will be undertaken through a variety of channels as it is recognised that the overall success of the trial hugely depends on both interactions.

Links to Transparency Agenda

Transparency is a major theme running through the Coalition Government's agenda. Eric Pickles has urged local government to be open about a whole range of information starting from 1st January 2011 with expenditure data over £500. KCC views transparency as a fundamental principle of how we do business and so this agenda sets the context in which Open Kent sits. It is vital that Kent residents are able to access information and data easily. Better access to information about the County Council itself will enable us to continue to improve our relationship with Kent residents through a more informed conversation, and facilitate "armchair auditors" to provide some scrutiny on what we do. However residents and organisations also want access to a whole raft of information about Kent and its economy, people and geography. For instance they may be thinking about setting up a new venture, or targeting voluntary activity to support a particular need, or undertaking research into the particular needs of their local community.

Whatever the reason, through the County Council's transparency programme, we will open up more information than ever before to residents and make it easier for them to find information that is already in the public domain. Open Kent is a key vehicle for delivering this.

Data Provision and standards

Open Kent's data is open and re-usable in line with national standards. Its ability to query existing databases with Kent Connects partner organisations makes 'linking data' much easier.

Open data is "non-personal" information that will be published in a way that enables people to be able to make use of it by visualisation and by comparing

it with similar datasets (either from a similar geographic place or service in another council).

Technology

Open Kent is currently delivered through the IBM Lotus Mashup Centre. It is in essence three products in one-

- The catalogue is where data is uploaded and stored in an internal database
- The toolbox provides an intuitive point, drag and drop interface to help visualise data and create new applications with it.
- The web server delivers all these services to the client internet browser.

Open Kent connects to a variety of raw data sources and once catalogued, data from separate sources can be combined without any programming skills required by the service user. In addition, information suppliers will not be required to re-key the raw data as the system will be able to access it directly either through the network or by uploading a report.

Open Kent will be accessed via a website that will be linked to each Kent Connects partner's open data site on their own website. This will make it easier for users to connect and visualise the data from across the partnership. The Open Kent site will be a shop window for the users. Through it they will be able to access the catalogue of all the data that has been made available by the partners. There will also be a set of tools which will enable users to look at the data, convert into charts and tables, visualise it and map it. Finally there will be a showcase area for the data that has already been combined and enhanced.

Benefits

There is strong demand for both transparency of and access to information. By actively making our data easily available it will not only help improve confidence in public sector activities but will once again show KCC and its Kent partners as leading the agenda for greater transparency.

Open Kent provides the tools to help users better access and visualise this information including the most popular types of data requested by the public such as:-

- comparison of services, spend and performance
- finding location of specific services and combining this with other data
- making sense of complex information

The benefits, over time for Kent County Council and the other Kent Connects partners will include:

- minimising the need to directly fulfil the majority of requests for information, although where required staff and others could provide the data on behalf of users. Initial trials suggest that user satisfaction levels increase.
- reducing staff time and costs (although it is fair to say that this is not always through direct cashable savings), by enabling users to access data in ways that they decide.
- enabling easier access to asset and performance data to inform more “place-based” decision making around improving performance, identifying gaps and pooling resources
- accessing what has been created using Open Kent and using this knowledge to capture customer insight and interact with the people who are making the visualisations. It can help them identify new trends and compare performance.

Next steps

There is the potential to offer the product to other authorities either in its entirety or in modules. The national agenda for local authorities to publish more information and provide greater transparency means that they will increasingly be looking for workable solutions. As a result, as part of the overall progression and transition of the project, further work will be undertaken to ensure exploitation of the system.

The initial development of the new system will be completed by 31st January 2011. This will then be tested and user feedback will contribute to its further development. It is currently expected that the system will be ready to go live by early April. Upon completion Open Kent will be reviewed with recommendations for sustainable transition discussed through the Kent Connects Strategic Board. Promotion, support and maintenance of the service will be needed although this will be through existing resources.

User testing

User testing will take place in February when the initial site is completed but not yet live. User activities will include testing the

- design and information architecture
- web compatibility
- accessibility –KCC and the Kent Connects partners are committed to aligning Open Kent with the Local Government Equality Standards and with specific user testing by equality and diversity groups
- training tools

It is planned to use and build on the findings from the research on how Members access information (commissioned by MIMOG) during the testing period.

Conclusion

Members of the Corporate Policy Overview Committee are asked to note the contents of this report