

By: Geoff Wild, Director of Law and Governance

To: Selection and Member Services Committee – 14 March 2008

Subject: Modernising Democratic Services and Local Leadership

Summary: To note the ongoing modernisation programme for the Democratic Services and Local Leadership Unit and the engagement of Members and other stakeholders in order to bring about an excellent and continually improving service.

Unrestricted

Introduction

1. When the Corporate Policy Overview Committee considered the report on the modernisation of Democratic Services on 25 January 2008, it concluded that there should be a detailed discussion at Selection and Member Services Committee on the modernisation programme and the engagement of Members in this process as one of the 'key customers' of the Unit.

Context

2. (1) In October 2005, Peter Gilroy set the management team of the Democratic Services Unit a challenge to modernise the Unit. This was against the backdrop of a decreasing budget, year on year efficiency savings and new or pending legislation aimed at greater community engagement and accountability to the public.

(2) At the heart of the current legislative framework is the requirement for public bodies through governance arrangements to provide the community ('community' is undefined) with improved and transparent access to the decision making process.

Modernisation Programme

3. (1) Members are already aware of the structural changes to deliver all Democratic Services (including the 'localism governance arrangements') and Member Support Services under the new Head of Democratic Services and Local Leadership, Peter Sass, who takes up his post on 1 April 2008.

(2) The County Council budget for 2008/09 includes £345k to equip the Unit with the resource to take forward the County Council agenda of community engagement and leadership. This will shortly be the subject of a report to Cabinet and the County Council.

(3) Members will also be aware that at the conclusion of the recent CPA inspection in February areas of comment of which Democratic Services need to take cognizance include:

- “Should look to developing modern community leadership more inclusively”;
- “In the Council membership, allow better engagement of the opposition for ultimately stronger decision making”; and
- “In local communities – a re-think on local boards“.

Taking the Modernisation Programme Forward

(4) There are a number of important work streams already underway which will contribute significantly to the modernisation programme and will result in greater capacity for the support the Unit can provide to Members to discharge their role. These include:

- (a) A Committee Management system has been installed which will go live in April. One of the key features of the system is its ability to automatically assist with the creation of agendas, minutes and the Forward Pan of key decisions. The main features of the system are set out in the Appendix to this report. Once staff are happy with the core applications of the system, further work will be undertaken to develop new applications which will build capacity.
- (b) Working towards the accreditation of the South East Employers Member Development Charter. The goal is to achieve accreditation and the award of the Charter by April 2009. Ownership by the Members for Member development and having the appropriate skills required to discharge the role of an effective ‘Frontline Councillor’ will help build capacity for both Members and officers.
- (c) Improving the information made available to Members to discharge their role. Currently, Members are overwhelmed by information. The information sources are many and varied, both in terms of quantity and quality. A Member Group is currently looking at streamlining information flows and improving the quality of the information available so it is more useful to Members in discharging their function.

Customer Survey

(5) Last summer, the political group whips asked Members to complete a short questionnaire on a range of Member services. The results of this are already being taken forward by this Committee and through a number of Member Groups, including those for Member Information and Member Development.

(6) The Informal Member Steering Group on Member Information has asked that a survey be undertaken of Member information needs.

(7) Reflecting on the views expressed at the Corporate Policy Overview Committee, I am proposing (subject to this Committee’s agreement) that a comprehensive survey of Member needs, and how the Democratic Services and Local Leadership Unit might meet those needs, should be conducted.

Innovation

(8) The Unit is constantly looking at ways of enhancing its service, exploring innovation both in terms of new technology and process by looking at best practice both in the UK and overseas.

(9) For example, the Unit has recently trialled a 'computer tablet' which, through handwritten recognition, turns the handwriting into electronic text. Whilst the technology has improved over the last two years since it was last trialled, it is not quite as good as it needs to be in order to be useful at this stage - but it is only a matter of time and its future development will be kept under review.

Benchmarking

(10) Staff in the Unit already engage, network, and participate in a number of cross Authority working groups throughout the South East. However, I am now asking the Unit to look to other areas where it is known that there is evidence of best practice and innovation which Kent may wish to embrace. I am keen to not only capture and incorporate the best practice from elsewhere, but to also be able to benchmark KCC's services against that practice, to plot its progress against it using clear, measurable and comparable data.

Meetings of the County Council

(11) The County Council has continued to experiment with formats in which it can involve more effectively both the Members of the County Council and the public.

(12) Webcasting meetings of the County Council and extending the programme of webcasts to other meetings. The following meetings are already webcast:

- Council
- Cabinet
- Cabinet Scrutiny Committee
- School Organisation Advisory Board
- Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee

It is proposed that the programme be rolled out further over the coming year to include the following meetings:

- Highways Advisory Board
- Adult Social Services Policy Overview Committee
- Children, Families and Education Policy Overview Committee
- Communities Policy Overview Committee
- Environment and Regeneration Policy Overview Committee
- Planning Applications Committee
- Regulation Committee
- Governance and Audit Committee

This will provide the public with greatly increased access to the democratic process and allow them greater involvement in and awareness of the decision makers who take the decisions.

(13) In addition to extending the programme of webcasts of meetings held at Sessions House, the Unit will also be exploring the possible piloting of webcasts in venues outside Maidstone.

(14) Select Committees will, where appropriate, engage witnesses via video conferencing links. Electronic consultations will also be conducted.

Streamlining Decision Making and Democratic Services processes

(15) The Unit will continue to review on a systematic basis ways in which it can streamline the decision making processes and build capacity. Initially, it is planned to review the individual Cabinet Member decision process, the process for the Community Grant Schemes and School Admission and Transport Appeals.

(16) Agreeing work programmes and exploring the potential to pool resources will be pursued and is a key component to the emerging overview, scrutiny and localism agenda.

Conclusion

4. Good progress has been made on the modernisation programme to take the Unit forward so it is fit for the 21st century. The modernisation programme will only succeed, however, if it has:

- (a) the commitment and ownership of the Members and staff (both within the Unit and across the authority) and
- (b) the necessary investment, both in terms of new equipment and staff resource, made available to it.

Recommendation

5. The Committee is asked to:

- (a) note the on-going programme to modernise the Democratic Service and Local Leadership Unit; and
- (b) approve the conducting of a comprehensive survey of Member needs, as referred to in paragraph 3(7), above.

Main features of modern.gov (Committee Management System)

- Make the production of Agenda, minutes and the Forward Plan easier and more consistent by using the systems member database, reports and other information to self populate them.
- Agenda and papers for meetings can be automatically prepared in pdf format, put together as a pack, indexed and send direct to County Print for printing.
- Democratic Services will be able to publish committee papers directly to the web - ensuring that statutory deadlines are met.
- Keyword and free text search of all Committee Minutes and agenda from 2001 - which will eliminate the need to carry out time consuming manual searches for information.
- Calendar of meetings - on the web and intranet, easy to update and will link to meeting information - which will help to avoid the problems caused by officers in other directorates arranging Member events which clash with programmed meetings.
- Deadline reminder feature.
- Outlook Calendar integration - meeting dates and links can appear in Members and Officers Outlook Calendar automatically.
- Members and others will be able to register for email alerts when information on a specific issue is published - which will avoid the need to contact Democratic Services officers and ask for information.
- Some automation for the processing of Cabinet Member decisions with a colour coded decision tracking system.
- Committee statistics can be produced from the system including records of Members attendance and an email alert if a Member has not attended for a specific period.
- Some of the visible benefits that will be seen by Members and officers:
 - Agenda/Minutes - quicker publication to the web.
 - Calendar of meetings - which will link to more information about the meeting.
 - Searchable on-line library of Minutes and reports
 - Outlook Calendar integration - which some Members have been asking for.
 - Email alerts - which will ensure that Members and Officers are sent a link whenever an agenda or a Committee report on a specific subject is published.