

“The Kent Commitment”

Statement of Intent from Kent's Local Government Leaders

1. We want Kent to have the best local government in the UK. We believe that we can build upon the current two-tier arrangements to help to achieve this. We are therefore not submitting any bids for unitary or pathfinder status. For us success means achieving 5 key outcomes:

- An excellent **customer** experience for all the people of Kent who use local government, with fair, simple and equitable access to services and improved satisfaction rates
- Greater engagement of local **communities** so that communities are more involved in shaping their local quality of life through decision making being taken at the lowest possible level
- More **clout** in shaping the economic growth and regeneration of each part of the county, by effectively combining the decisions and resources held by national and regional bodies with those of the County Council and District Councils.
- An ambitious programme of **cost** reduction, so that cost savings are driven out of the opportunities for 13 councils to work together in Kent through sharing best practice, best providers and common infrastructure
- A combined set of outstanding **capabilities**, so that the councils nurture between them the internal talent and external suppliers who can deliver the ambitions which the councils have for the people of Kent

This is our vision for Kent – if we can achieve it, it will give the people of Kent the best local government in the UK.

2. Kent is a large and diverse county. We believe that the two tier arrangements provide the opportunity to best respond to this diversity and to benefit from the scale of the county as a whole. Our current structure provides a rich mix of councils, which together can build on previous success to provide Kent with the best local government in the UK. There are 12 District Councils who are best placed to respond to the local circumstances of their area and to nurture the engagement of local communities in shaping the local area and refining the public services available. The County Council is best placed to deliver county-wide personal services in care and education, as well as to engage with district councils and other partners to tackle the major strategic issues of transport, environment and economic development where they cut across the county as a whole. The County Council and District Councils are able to combine and join-up their roles in each district, whilst groups of councils can come together to tackle issues of common concern.

3. However, we believe that there are a range of positive opportunities to work together even more closely in the next few years to innovate and improve the quality of life of people in Kent. Over coming months, we will work together to tackle these opportunities. In deciding on the priorities, we will build upon the diversity of Kent to find a range of solutions which work for individual councils and individual areas of the county. We can achieve this in two ways. Firstly, the County Council is enthusiastic to respond flexibly to each of its partner councils. Secondly, we can tap into the different strengths of each council to find the right alliances to support other councils achieving their priorities in delivering the vision for Kent local government.

4. If we are to further improve Kent's local government, we will need the support of our key partners. We will need central government and regional bodies to join our endeavour, committing themselves to our vision and exploring how their flexibility, decision-making and delivery capacity can be better aligned

with our new approaches. We will need to work closely with our Kent-based public sector partners, for example in Medway Council, in policing and in health, to refine our partnerships with them and to give them the opportunity to shape and benefit from the new approaches we are developing. Most importantly, we will need the support of local communities in the county, through their parish / town councils and voluntary groups, to help us shape and deliver the vision.

5. We are launching an action plan to tackle the opportunities:

- (a) Each District Council will work individually with the County Council to identify a package of improvements to two-tier working within the district. This will include the opportunity to devolve decision-making or service provision to a district level, to improve the joint working of County and District Councillors, and to integrate functions which improve the effectiveness and efficiency of both councils. Each district-based partnership of the County and District Council will also agree on the potential for improved engagement with local communities through their frontline County / District councillors, parish / town councils and/or voluntary groups.
- (b) All Councils will explore the potential to share services, especially in back office functions such as finance, IT, HR, property and procurement. It is anticipated that each council will indicate where it believes it is well placed to offer a service to others and where it would be keen to either receive a service from another council or to combine functions together with another council. On the basis of this match-making, individual councils will explore with potential partners how shared services might benefit them, testing out the assumptions through a rigorous business case process.
- (c) The existing county-wide partnership structure will be reviewed so that county-wide issues are dealt with more effectively. This will include the design of how the Kent councils shape and decide upon the Local Area Agreement, which in turn shapes the relationship between us all and central government. In order to maximise the county's clout on growth and regeneration, there will be an intensive discussion with the key national and regional bodies about how national, regional and local agendas for Kent can all be better achieved by new ways of working.
- (d) We all recognise the work of East Kent in developing a cluster model. The four District Councils and the County Council will continue to work together as a cluster, based on an agreed working document, to consider intensively the opportunities for much greater integration of policy and delivery. As well as considering the issues listed in (a) to (c), the East Kent cluster will consider how to further combine policy and influence across the 4 district areas, the potential to share a wide range of public-facing services and whether there are ways to combine management structures and improvement programmes. Other councils in Kent are keen to learn from this review in East Kent and to consider whether it suggests opportunities in other parts of the county.

6. We are committed to completing this action plan by the late summer of this year, reviewing the options available and shaping up our priorities. On the basis of this work, we intend to announce both individually and together our conclusions and implementation plans in September. At that time, we will commit ourselves to two year plans which deliver real benefits by the Autumn of 2009, including many quicker wins. In order to hold ourselves to account, we will commit to clear measurable targets based on customer experience, community engagement, clout on growth and regeneration, cost reduction and capability.

7. We look forward to working with each other, our public sector partners and local people to realise our vision for the local government of Kent. As we apply ourselves to the immediate action plan, we will, as the Leaders of our Councils, take personal responsibility for ensuring that we fully grasp the potential we have between our councils and to overcome the barriers to realising this potential.