

By: Alex King – Deputy Leader
Paulina Stockell – Chairman, Selection and Member Services
Committee

To: County Council – 11 December 2008

Subject: Publicising and Launching Select Committee Reports

Summary: This reports sets out the recommendations of the Policy Overview Co-ordinating Committee (POCC) to establish a Public Relations Protocol for Select Committee and how the launching of the Select Review reports could be improved.

Introduction

1. At its meeting on 10 September 2008 the Policy Overview Co-ordinating Committee received the recommendations of an Informal Member Group it had established on how the County Council could improve the publicising and launching of Select Committee reports. This report was deferred by the Selection and Member Services Committee at its meeting on 8 October 2008 to allow further consideration to be given to the contents of the report by the three Leaders. The meeting of the three Leaders took place on 11 November 2008.

Publicising of Select Committee Reviews

2. (1) It has become clear from the views expressed by Members that there is often a difficulty in publicising the work of Select Committees via the local media. Looking at the Centre for Public Scrutiny Website and from contact with colleagues in other local authorities, this is a common challenge for Overview and Scrutiny.

(2) Some of this arises from the local media's lack of understanding of the work of Select Committees as opposed to the much clearer Committee system. There is also the issue of the media being decision-focused and therefore reporting on the work of Cabinet and Planning Application Committees, rather than Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

(3) The POCC acknowledged that this was a challenging area and agreed that the attached Protocol (**Appendix 1**) should be submitted to the Selection and Member Services Committee for approval and submission to County Council for incorporation into the Constitution.

(4) The Head of Communications and Media Centre was present at the POCC meeting and gave her support to the proposed Protocol.

Launching of Select Committee Reviews

3. (1) The POCC at its meeting on 10 September 2008 also considered the issue of establishing a process for the launching of Select Committee reports. It was

acknowledged that Members of Select Committees put a lot of work into producing their reports and this was recognised when the report is considered by Cabinet and the County Council. However, it is also important, especially for those witnesses who had contributed to the report and partners who may have been involved in the review, that the report is launched as widely as possible so that it has the potential to achieve the maximum impact both internally and externally for the benefit of the residents of Kent.

(2) The POCC agreed that the most effective time to launch a Select Committee report was at a formal meeting of the County Council when the majority of County Councillors were present. They recommended that the launch of a Select Committee report should be a very early item on the County Council Agenda after the report by the Leader of the County Council.

(3) Select Committee items at County Council should be allowed sufficient time for a constructive debate. The amount of time needed would be dependent on the specific report. It was anticipated that this would be approximately two hours – but could be longer or shorter as appropriate.

(4) It would be helpful if the Chairman of the Select Committee and other cross-party Members from the Select Committee had an input into that part of the County Council agenda to determine who should be invited to speak and to assist with the discussion and the length of time this item should take.

(5) The POCC was of the view that the debate on a Select Committee report should be led by the Select Committee Chairman and Members of the Select Committee, rather than the Cabinet Members. It was acknowledged that this proposal would need to be discussed with the Chairman of the County Council and the Cabinet.

(6) The Committee also stressed the importance of encouraging Kent TV to assist in launching and publishing Select Committee report.

Views Expressed by the Three Leaders

4. (1) The three Leaders would welcome the Policy Overview Co-ordinating Committee exploring how the Select Committee Work Programme can be developed to ensure that the majority of the County Council meetings have a Select Committee report for debate. The three Leaders suggested that it might be more appropriate to have the debate on Select Committee reports in the afternoon of County Council meetings.

(2) The three Leaders recognised that the proposals of the Policy Overview Co-ordinating Committee will require discussion with the Chairman of the Council and also Cabinet Members.

Selection and Member Services Committee

5. The Selection and Member Services Committee agreed at its meeting on 26 November 2008 that the Public Relations Protocol for Select Committee Reviews and Reports and the process for launching these reviews did not need to be incorporated

or embedded into the Constitution but that they should instead be referenced within it.

Recommendations

6. That the County Council be recommended to:-
 - (a) approve the Public Relations Protocol for Select Committee Reviews and Reports as set out in **Appendix 1** to this report; and
 - (b) recommend further discussions between the Policy Overview Co-ordinating Committee, the Chairman of the County Council and Members of the Cabinet on the process for launching Select Committee reviews and reports be endorsed.

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Background Information: *None*

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Kent County Council

PUBLIC RELATIONS PROTOCOL FOR SELECT COMMITTEE REVIEWS AND REPORTS

This protocol has been written as a basis for all communications between Select Committee Members and the media. It will ensure that the corporate communications team is able to maximise opportunities for scrutiny to publicise its work and promote the transparency of the Council's decision-making process.

- All actions should be in accordance with the letter and spirit of the DCLG Code of recommended practice on local authority publicity.
- Media activity should be co-ordinated through the corporate communications team who will make arrangements and ensure that the appropriate Members are put forward, rather than Select Committee Members approaching the media direct to discuss the topic review.
- The Select Committee Chairman should be the official spokesperson for the review report, unless another more suitable spokesperson has been identified by the Chairman.
- Chairmen of Select Committees will be expected to attend or have attended media training.
- There is potential, on rare occasions, for conflict between scrutiny and cabinet on issues. Maintaining the professional reputation of the council in the eyes of the public is paramount and conflicting statements may make the council appear inept or divided. Care should be taken, on all sides, to avoid this situation from arising. But in such circumstances Corporate Communications would present factual information to the media fairly representing both the Scrutiny and Cabinet viewpoints.
- The corporate communications team should be advised of any media enquiries received by Select Committee Members to offer guidance and help if required and to monitor responses.
- Press releases for Select Committees will be drafted by a member of the corporate communications team, in consultation with the Research Officer for the review and approved by Select Committee Chairman, in consultation with the Overview, Scrutiny and Localism Manager.
- Press releases will be fair and representative of the views of the Select Committee. They may include the views expressed in minority reports if those views differ from the main report.
- The media are invited to attend all formal meetings of Select Committee unless matters of an exempt nature are to be discussed.

- When the report of the Select Committee is ready to go into the public domain a member of the corporate communications team, in consultation with the Research Officer to the Select Committee drafts a press release. Where possible the press release should include input from a third party who has been involved with the review. The Press release should be approved by the Select Committee Chairman (with the nominated official spokesman, where appropriate) in consultation with the Overview, Scrutiny and Localism Manager. An embargoed copy of the press release should be sent out with an electronic copy of the report, to the media a day before the public domain with an embargo on it. There may or may not be a press conference but the Chairman, relevant members make sure they are available for interviews.
- Corporate Communications officers are permitted to refuse to prepare press releases, deal with media enquiries or arrange media interviews in the following cases:
 - (i) If the press release or enquiry is political in any way.
 - (ii) If the information in the press release is deemed libellous or malicious
- Corporate Communications officers will not organise interviews between media and individual members of the Select Committee unless there is explicit agreement by the Select Committee Chairman.
- Press releases will not be issued as a matter of course after Select Committee meetings simply to record the proceedings. Post-meeting publicity will, however, be given where there is good reasons for doing so e.g. to promote opportunities for public consultation.