

By: Mr P Carter, Leader of the Council  
To: County Council – 11 December 2008  
Subject: SELECT COMMITTEE: ACCESSING DEMOCRACY

---

Summary: To comment on and endorse the report of the Select Committee on Accessing Democracy.

---

## **Introduction**

1. The Corporate Policy Overview Committee proposed the establishment of a Select Committee to look at the some of the issues around Accessing Democracy. This was agreed by the Policy Overview Co-ordinating Committee at its meeting on 7 June 2007.

## **Select Committee Process**

### *Membership*

2. The Select Committee commenced its work in February 2008. The Chairman of the Select Committee was Mrs Christine Angell, other members being Mrs Ann Allen, Mr David Brazier, Mr Bill Hayton, Mr George Koowaree, Mr Mike Snelling, Mrs Eileen Rowbotham and Mr Roland Tolputt.

### *Terms of Reference*

3. The Terms of Reference for this Select Committee Topic Review were to:-
- To understand why many people do not participate in and influence decision making in Kent
  - To discover what would/could encourage more people to participate in and influence decision making in Kent
  - To discover what KCC can do to increase participation

### *Evidence*

4. The Committee used a number of evidence sources to inform their investigations including oral and written evidence from a wide range of stakeholders.

### *Timescale*

5. The Select Committee met with Mr A J King, Deputy Leader, Corporate Support and External Affairs; Mr R Hardy, Director for Improvement and Engagement and Mr P Sass Head of Democratic Services and Local Leadership, on 3 September 2008 to receive comments on the Select Committee report. A copy of the Executive Summary and recommendations **is attached as Appendix 1**. The full report is available on the website and on request to the Democratic Services and Local Leadership Unit.

## Conclusion

6. (1) I would like to congratulate the Select Committee on completing this very challenging piece of work. I would also like to thank all those witnesses who gave evidence to the Select Committee.

(2) The attached report was presented to the Cabinet on 15 September 2008 by Mrs C Angell, Chairman of the Select Committee, Mr D Brazier and Mr G Koowaree. The Leader thanked the Select Committee for its work and said that this had to be seen as part of a wider picture which included the work being currently undertaken through the Informal Member Groups on Member Development and Member Information. All these streams of work needed to be brought together and discussed collectively so that Members of the Council could have the opportunity to consider the total picture and how these matters should be taken forward.

## 4. Recommendations

I recommend that:-

- (a) the Select Committee report and its recommendations r be endorsed by the County Council;
- (b) the Select Committee be thanked for an excellent report on a complex, challenging and emotive issue;
- (c) the witnesses and others who provided evidence and made valuable contributions to the work of the Select Committee be thanked;

Mr P Carter  
Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Policy and Performance

Background Information: *None*

Please contact Angela Evans on 01622 221876 or email [angela.evans@kent.gov.uk](mailto:angela.evans@kent.gov.uk) if you require a full copy of the report.

# ACCESSING DEMOCRACY

## YOU CAN DO IT. REAL POLITICS FOR REAL PEOPLE

Executive Summary  
August 2008



# Foreword

People are accused of becoming bored and disenchanted with politics. When there is an issue which affects people, or their neighbourhood they will make their views and opinions felt, the so called 'single issue' debate. We need to build on that keen interest in community.

This Select Committee will not solve the issues of accessing democracy at a stroke. What it does is act as a pointer to enabling elected members to become involved in a variety of ways in their community. We already have many councillors who engage and work very hard for their constituents, however, with the increasing pressures on people's time, combined with the growth of technology people are keen to have a choice how to engage.

If people take time to engage they need to be listened to and their comments made, when asked, need to be seen to be acknowledged and be seen to make a difference. If not we end up with even more cynical members of the public, believing consultation to be merely a 'tick-box' exercise.

Decisions and choices which affect people need to be explained clearly and communicated in a way that engages all. Sometimes difficult decisions need to be made, and the choices need to be explained clearly to those affected. People are not foolish and we, as a Select Committee heard that when difficult decisions and choices need to be made, the people made their choice in a rational and appropriate way in order to benefit the most number of people in the community. We need conversations and dialogue rather than choices alone!

Decisions are often complex, there will always be conflicting objectives, conflicting stakeholders views, and with properly planned participation there will always be more than one thing that will be achieved. However, engaging and accessing Citizen Kent in those decisions which affect the community need to use many methods and approaches as 'one size does not fit all'. The public after all are not a homogenous group communities are actually made up of different people.

We, as a county council, have ever growing numbers of partners 'delivering' services to the community. As elected members we are ideally placed as representatives of our community. In our day to day activities we seek out to reach as many members of our community as possible. By engaging people at the point of delivery, we can enable citizens to shape their community and in turn community cohesion will build and grow making Kent an even better place to live, work and play.

Christine Angell  
Chair, Accessing Democracy Select Committee

## Executive Summary and Recommendations

1. In January 2008 an eight Member Select Committee was established to carry out a review on Accessing Democracy with the following terms of reference:

- To understand why many people do not participate in and influence decision making in Kent
- To discover what would/could encourage more people to participate in and influence decision making in Kent
- To discover what Kent County Council can do to increase participation

1.1 The Members of the Accessing Democracy Select Committee were:



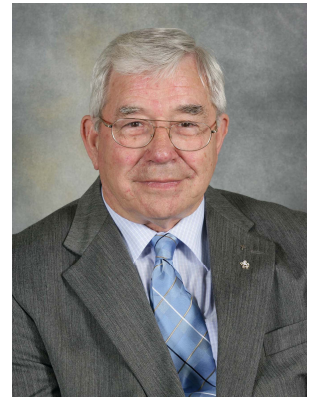
Mrs Christine Angell  
(Chair)  
Labour



Mrs Ann Allen  
Conservative



Mr David Brazier  
Conservative



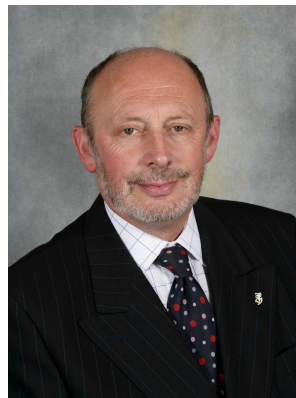
Mr Bill Hayton  
Conservative



Mr George Koowaree  
Liberal Democrat



Mrs Eileen  
Rowbotham  
Labour



Mr Mike Snelling  
Conservative



Mr Roland Tolputt  
Conservative

1.2 This report considers the steps needed to revive involvement in local decision making. It looks at the use of new technology and participation methods to facilitate two way communications with the public on local service policies and priorities, the localism agenda and structures and the role of elected members within a mix of representative and participative democracy. The review focuses on the themes of how to get people interested, how to encourage people to participate and improving knowledge and understanding of the opportunities to participate. The Select Committee used a number of evidence sources to inform the investigation, including hearings, discussion groups, insight gathering with local residents, written evidence, key documents and national research. This is written in the context of Kent County

Council (KCC) and KCC elected members, with recognition that as a two- tier authority in Kent there is similar debate with District partners.

1.3 Our report contains a number of recommendations, which if agreed by Cabinet and the County Council will hopefully reinvigorate local democracy in Kent and result in people becoming more involved and influencing decision making, in both the short and longer term.

#### **1.4 Key points are**

- Empowering elected members to be as accessible and responsive as possible is key and needs the imaginative use of both traditional methods and new technology.
- Two-way communication is a key component if we are to successfully engage with local people in local democracy.
- Elected member roles are fundamental to the development of effective local involvement.
- There needs to be greater opportunity for the further development of the role of frontline elected members, empowering them to make locally evidenced based decisions.
- There needs to be an enabling of Local Forums to become increasingly targeted on local priorities and outcomes, through dialogue, action planning, joint commitment and the ability to respond.
- Need to use new technology and opportunities presented by e-democracy to broaden input into local decision making processes, making it easier for some and develop dialogue with local people, and support the development of a range of tools. These won't necessarily engage uninterested people and an outreach approach may still be needed – a combination of tools is essential.
- Need positive, adaptable and flexible approach.
- Whilst there are diverging views amongst members, it is clear that one key factor is that however challenging, representative and participative processes are both key components of a healthy local democracy.
- Also need to consider how local people would like to take this agenda forward - One size does not fit all – within the framework Kent County Council and elected members should use innovation and flexibility to achieve best outcomes.

#### *Recommendations*

**R1: Raise profile of elected members and use other strategies to change public perception.**

**R2:** A 'menu of options' of how local people can get involved in local democracy in Kent should be promoted.

- a) All proposals taken through County Council or Overview and Scrutiny should be required to state the degree of public involvement to date. This would improve accountability and demonstrate how information from consultations is used (especially the effect on decision making).
- b) Existing good practice should be advertised and promoted, identifying future priority issues for local action/campaign with elected members and/or highlight possible areas for review.

**R3:** The Member Charter, and programme of member development to help ensure Kent has high calibre effective community leaders, should incorporate media training and public speaking skills.

**R4:** As part of the Communications Strategy KCC should actively promote the role of elected members as community leaders and advocates within their community using a range of communication tools.

**R5:** Embrace democracy in secondary schools and school councils should be encouraged to operate through age range - advocate school councils in primary school.

- a) All elected members should be involved in schools democracy week.
- b) Ensure all teaching staff are firmly encouraged to undertake Continuous Professional Development on democracy.
- c) Linkage between School Councils, Kent County Council and District, Town and Parish Councils should be promoted.

**R6:** Citizenship pack should include information on how to register to vote, the role of local elected members and how to contact local member at District, County and National level.

**R7:** Need to ensure that induction and information pack for new staff includes information on how to have your say and get involved in local decision making and how public involvement has made a difference.

**R8:** KCC should provide subtitles and British Sign Language option on all DVDs produced.

**R9: Elected members should have a hard copy summary of all the planned KCC consultations.**

- a) **Information regarding consultations and the need to inform and involve elected members needs to be highlighted and included within future plans to develop a discreet section of information for members on the web and clear commitments reflected within the Consultation and Engagement Strategy.**
- b) **Information on consultations should include note on method of engagement to be used.**

**R10:** Facilities for video conferencing should be utilized, maximizing opportunities in Kent with KCC and partners.

- a) Elected members should be supported in using this service through current resources, training and support mechanisms.

**R11:** Need effective promotion of E-consultation and decision making to raise profile and encourage local people to have their say and voices heard.

- a) All engagement activities and weblinks should be brought under easily recognisable umbrella and portal e.g. 'Ask Kent', to ensure two way interactive communication.

- b) Facilities for blogs, emails, online surgeries, plus training and support should be available for elected members.

**R12:** In promoting the role of elected members and interaction with communities KCC should embrace e-democracy/ technological solutions to make elected members activities more visible and to open up dialogue and debate, for example e-petition, e-campaigns generated by Local Boards and local people, and e-debate.

**R13:** Raising interest in both the opportunity and how to become an elected member needs to be clear and transparent. Agree more diversity in elected members is seen to be beneficial but is complex and worthy of separate study.

**R14:** 'Top tips' and contact details on making contact with seldom heard/ perceived hard to reach communities should be included in all new ward packs.

**R15:**

- a) The introduction of role descriptions for all elected members needs to be supported.
- b) The IDEA Councillors guide should be actively promoted and need to ensure all elected members have a copy.
- c) Training for elected members in ways of local government and ongoing training to help elected members carry out their role effectively should be actively supported.

**R16:** To effectively strengthen local structures for community engagement and encourage involvement in local decision making need

- a) Localism to be more outcome focussed.
- b) mechanism for prompt feedback to the public on specific issues.
- c) to explore further with District, Town and Parish Councils and other local partners what they believe would improve community engagement.
- d) to devolve power and resources to support local priorities and action, from discretionary funds being delegated to local forums for decision making.
- e) Chief Officers and Cabinet should identify which services can be delegated to local level and be influenced by members in their representative capacity based on views of community priorities and preferences.

**R17:** The opportunity for participatory budgeting from devolved discretionary funds should be provided within the next budget year, with delivery mechanism to be determined, and a sum of underpinning monies to enable local people to determine how the resource should be spent.