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To: Economic Development Cabinet Committee – 14 June 2013
Subject: Maximising Business Engagement
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Summary:

Kent County Council currently engages with businesses through a number of mechanisms, and mostly for a specific purpose e.g. a business may wish to apply for a loan from Expansion East Kent, or may be supported to recruit an apprentice through Kent Jobs for Kent Young People.

At present this contact with business is generally run for a specific purpose, and the strategic learning from the programmes could be better gathered together to produce intelligence to inform service delivery. Furthermore there is potentially many instances where more than one part of KCC is engaged with, or trying to engage, with the same business, albeit for different purposes (for example Trading Standards, Skills & Employability, Health, Expansion East Kent could all have reason to be in contact with a business)

This paper looks at possible solutions for maximising the benefits of our current and future relationship with business.

1. Introduction

1.1 Our vision is to have a strong relationship with the business sector in Kent, one where the council is aware of changing business challenges and needs, and where it is seen as a strong supporter of growth, and is alert to emerging issues.

1.2 Our objectives in achieving this vision are to:

- Support growth and jobs
- Develop strong communication with companies to support the effective flow of information
- Understand the needs of businesses of all sizes
- To respond quickly to what business tells us, taking action where we can
- To support business in Kent by, where appropriate, developing programmes to meet their needs
- To facilitate Kent companies in accessing appropriate support from external sources
- To facilitate opportunities for businesses in Kent to network and develop beneficial relationships with each other.

1.3 Through this work our primary goal is to ensure that Kent County Council is doing it all it can to support business growth in Kent. We will continue to work in partnership with a number of organisations both internal and external to KCC, to ensure that we are promoting to businesses the support that is available to them, but also, where possible, filling gaps in support identified by our engagement.

1.4 To achieve this goal we will work through three focus areas, these are:

- Making the most of our existing contacts with business
- Building a strong relationship with 50 key businesses in Kent
- Working with sectors

The plan attached at **Appendix A** lays out where we are now, where we want to be in twelve months time, and what we will deliver in each of the focus areas.

Whilst the action plan, **Appendix B**, shows what we need to do to deliver our vision

2. Making the most of our existing contact with business

2.1 Whilst clearly it would be beneficial to be able to engage meaningfully with every business in Kent, experience shows that this is not realistic. Business is more likely to be responsive to engagement when there is some benefit to their business from doing so. Because of this, we will in the first instance, focus our effort on those businesses who currently have a relationship with KCC, however small that may be.

2.2 Currently, Kent County Council delivers many programmes of support to business in Kent, however, we could better learn strategically from these interactions, and convert a higher proportion of these business engagements into more meaningful relationships. Furthermore there is no systematic way for one programme to be aware of whether the company they are working with are also engaging with another part of the organisation.

2.3 A list of the initiatives supported by KCC to support businesses is attached at **Appendix C**, with levels of engagement identified as follows:

- **Level 1 businesses – being contacted by or contacting KCC**
- **Level 2 businesses – linked to KCC through its initiatives**
- **Level 3 businesses – benefiting directly from support**
- **Level 4 businesses – having a direct relationship with KCC**

2.4 The quantum of companies who currently have direct contact with KCC programmes could number approximately 4,000, which is approaching 10% of all companies. Notwithstanding that it is not currently possible to tell if there is double counting of companies, this is a large number of companies, and has the potential to provide a rich source of information to us. It is clear

from the variety of the services that are provided by the council (as detailed in Appendix C) that there is likely to be many areas where a business could be engaged with by several parts of the council, with no way for the respective services to be aware of the others work with that company.

- 2.5** In addition to the contact that KCC has with business, it is important to recognise that District and Borough councils have established relationships with many businesses in their area, and it will be important to work with colleagues in these areas to understand how we can build on their resources and share intelligence.
- 2.6** Intelligence gathered from the sector based conversations we have held, along with feedback from business forums such as the Business Advisory Board, tell us that although businesses may be in need of support, or may want support, they often do not know where to access this support, this has become even starker with the loss of the Business Link and the associated website.
- 2.7** To overcome the issues identified above we propose developing a web portal that contains all KCC business support in one area, and provides easy to find links to other sites that can provide support services/funding to businesses in Kent.
- 2.8** To ensure that KCC is using its contacts with business to inform future programme development we will identify all current programmes across the council, analyze what it currently tells us, and use this information to develop further programmes. We will also share this intelligence with appropriate partners across the council, and with external partners such as district councils, JCP, Skills Funding Agency etc.
- 2.9** We will look to move companies from the first three levels of engagement to level 4, having a direct relationship with KCC, in order that they can help shape and deliver our priorities for growth.
- 2.10** To ensure that KCC and its delivery partners are aware of which businesses are in contact with KCC, and what the nature of that relationship is we will investigate whether it would be feasible and beneficial to instigate the use of a common CRM system.

3. Building strong relationships with 50 key Kent companies

- 3.1** Although the Kent economy is dominated by a large number of SMEs, it still contains a number of key companies, or those who show the potential for strong growth, or who are in key sectors of the economy. To ensure that KCC has an understanding of the business of these companies, is aware of the challenges they face, or how they could be assisted to grow it is essential that KCC develop strong lines of communication with them.
- 3.2** We will identify 50 key companies with which to build a closer relationship,

these companies could be identified from the various schemes identified in section 2 above, and could include for example:

- From Locate in Kent Aftercare programme – Avante, Cummins, Eurotunnel plc, Fresca/Thanet Earth, Fujifilm Sericol, Hornby, Kimberley Clarke, Saga Services Ltd, Silent Gliss, Towergate
- From Mega Growth 50 – Marlin Chemicals, Reeves, Motorline Holdings, COOK Trading Ltd, FM Conway Ltd, Bond Industries Ltd, Swale Heating Limited
- From Expansion East Kent – H.V Wooding, and other companies with large loans

In addition, we would add selected companies from High Growth Kent supported companies, BAB companies.

3.3 We would look to instigate 1:1 meetings with the companies with the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Economic Development. This could be complemented by a bi-annual event to encourage networking, and to present KCC developments.

3.4 It would also be the intention that this group would become a reference group for major initiatives.

4. Working with sectors

4.1 Priority 7 of the Bold Steps Delivery Framework outlines the need for KCC to “Build a strong relationship with key business sectors across Kent.” To date a large part of this effort has been the delivery of a series of sector conversations. These have provided a good way for the Council to engage with businesses, and have produced some strong intelligence on how KCC can support businesses, and much of this learning has been used to inform developments.

4.2 The conversations have led to some notable successes, including Kent Rural plc, and the partnership with the Banking Association, whilst many of the concerns of business are being addressed through KCC action, and planned action such as easing access to finance through Expansion East Kent and TIGER, or increasing access to fast broadband through the BDUK programme.

4.3 During the conversations, many of the sectors highlighted the benefit of being able to network with other businesses from their sector, and would welcome the Council’s support in facilitating further opportunities to do so. This has been shown to be effective through the Kent Rural plc initiative.

4.4 We will look to build on the sector conversations by looking at further sector focussed events, and ensuring that developments from previous events are delivered.

4.5 We will work with companies to facilitate the creation of sector based groups along the lines of Kent rural plc to enable networking, but also to provide a sector based reference group, that can advise KCC on sector specific support, and also work with departments across KCC, in particular Education, Learning and Skills, to promote their sectors and the employment opportunities to young people in Kent.

5 Next Steps

5.1 Economic Development Cabinet Committee is asked to comment on the draft action plan for maximising business engagement.

5.2 This paper and associated action plan will be considered by the Economic Development Cabinet Committee

Associated Papers:

Appendix A: Plan for Maximising Business Engagement

Appendix B: Maximising Business Engagement – Action Plan 2013/14

Appendix C: Business Engagement Table

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