

By: Overview, Scrutiny and Localism Manager

To: Corporate Policy Overview Committee
14 January 2009

Subject: **SELECT COMMITTEES - UPDATE**

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: This report updates Members on the Select Committee on Accessing Democracy and invites suggestions for future topic reviews.

Select Committee: Accessing Democracy

1. (1) This Select Committee under the Chairmanship of Mrs Angell produced its report which was considered by Cabinet on 15 September 2008. This report was considered at the County Council meeting on 11 December 2008 where it was well received.

(2) As part of the County Councils monitoring process for Select Committee recommendations the Select Committee will be reconvened in September 2009 to receive a report on progress with each of the recommendations. In the meantime a this Policy Overview Committee will receive, at its next meeting, an action plan showing how it is proposed to take the recommendations forward.

Suggestions for future Select Committee topic reviews

2. (1) The current Select Committee topic review programme is coming to an end and there is not sufficient time to commence any more reviews prior to the Elections in June 2009. However, it is important that topics are available to be considered early in the new Council so that a work programme can be approved and reviews started as soon as possible.

(2) Members are therefore requested to consider whether there are any potential topics that fall within the remit of this Policy Overview Committee, which they would like to put forward for consideration by the Policy Overview Co-ordinating Committee (POCC) at their meeting on 28 April 2009. At this meeting the POCC will be asked to indicate which potential topics could be included in a future work programme and a priority order. Initial work will then be carried out to scope these potential reviews before a final decision is taken on the work programme at a meeting of the POCC in July 2009.

(3) The Committee are reminded of the recent decision of the County Council that once a Topic Review has been included in the Work Programme as agreed by the POCC the detailed terms of reference each review will be developed by a cross party Member Group (one from each Group) for approval by the Select Committee.

(4) The POC will be kept informed of potential topics which are within its remit.

Recommendations

3 The Committee are asked to:-

(a) Note the update on the Select Committee on Accessing Democracy ;and

(b) Invite suggestions for potential Select Committee Topic reviews for consideration by the Policy Overview Co-ordinating Committee at its meeting on 28 April 2009

Denise Fitch
Assistant Democratic Services Manager (Policy Overview)
01622 694269
denise.fitch@kent.gov.uk

Background Information: *Nil*

ACCESSING DEMOCRACY: SELECT COMMITTEE

Executive Summary and Recommendations

1.0 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)
Mr Mike Snelling
Mr David Brazier
Mrs Ann Allen

Mrs Eileen Rowbotham
Mr Roland Tolputt
Mr George Koowaree
Mr Bill Hayton

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

- a) Embrace democracy in secondary schools and school councils should be encouraged to operate through age range - advocate school councils in primary school.**
- b) All elected members should be involved in schools democracy week.**
- c) Ensure all teaching staff are firmly encouraged to undertake Continuous Professional Development on democracy.**
- d) 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:

- a) Elected members should have a hard copy summary of all the planned KCC consultations.**
- b) 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.-**
- c) Information on consultations should include note on method of engagement to be used.**

R10:

- a) Facilities for video conferencing should be utilized, maximizing opportunities in Kent with KCC and partners.**
- b) Elected members should be supported in using this service through current resources, training and support mechanisms.**

R11:

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

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