

By: Roger Gough, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Support Services & Performance Management  
Jane Clarke, Head of Communications

To: Corporate Policy Overview Committee – 25 September 2009

Subject: Communicating with Kent Residents

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At the March 2009 Corporate Policy Overview Committee Jane Clarke gave a presentation on how we will communicate with Kent residents in the next five years. This paper gives an update on progress we have made over the last six months.

### **A more responsive website**

Since April we have been working on a project to make the website more useful and responsive to Kent residents. An investment of £750,000 has allowed us:

- to test with the public just how easy the website is to use
- commission a contemporary and accessible new look for the website
- make it easier for people to complete the most popular or important tasks

The newly designed home page will have a *Do it online* section. This will list the things people can do online such as pay for things, report faults, apply for services, ask questions or watch film clips. There will be a comprehensive Your Questions Answered section which will list the 20 top questions that Kent residents ask and clear and accessible answers will be given to these questions.

The current website has 8,000 pages. We are working with all the Directorates to make sure that all these pages are reviewed and made easier to understand. By 31 March 2010 all pages on the website will have been reviewed. See **Appendix One** for further details on the three phases of this project.

### **A single Kent wide publication for the public sector**

Currently KCC produces the *Around Kent* magazine twice a year. This is sent to every household in Kent – 630,000 copies. The twelve District Councils also produce their own magazines several times a year and the Police and NHS frequently communicate with residents with bespoke leaflets and newsletters. We spoke about the desirability of pulling this effort together to save resources.

For the autumn/winter edition of *Around Kent* we have joined forces with Dover and Swale District Councils and created district specific versions of the magazine. See the cover copies of the magazines attached. We have asked

for feedback and will see how well the joint magazines are received by their readers.

However it became clear during this pilot that it is labour intensive to create District specific versions. It may be a better route for KCC to join forces in our magazine with other county wide public services like the Police; Kent Fire and Rescue and the NHS.

### **A reduction in the number of publications produced by KCC**

We are working closely with the Directorate Resource Directors to reduce the number of publications KCC produces. We have created a publications spreadsheet which allows us to monitor publication activity. The information in the spreadsheet helps Resource Directors decide if a publication is really necessary and if it needs to be printed or can be published electronically. This is helping us reduce the amount we spend on publications.

### **Press releases which contain sound and video clips**

Four press officers and one support officer have now been trained to use video cameras so that they can produce short film and sound clips to send out with the traditional press releases. These are usually around a minute in duration. Our thanks go to Kent TV for training the press officers.

To date we have issued six video press notices: two on Channel hop activities; a feature on our climate change picture competition; one on our social worker recruitment campaign in Boston; an interview with Rosalind Turner as part of the recruitment of two CFE Director posts and coverage of the delegation from the Chinese Guangzhou Municipality who visited KCC to learn how we run our personnel department.

We have carried sound clip interviews with students in our coverage of this year's A' level and GCSE results.

### **Use of social media by KCC**

Social media is the collective name for a range of web based tools which are used for communicating and engaging with a range of people. The real value of social media is in the ability for individuals and communities to express their opinions, share thoughts and ideas, images and videos. The tools connect people to each other and allow conversations to happen (often in real time) without restrictions.

These tools present many opportunities for KCC as well as having some risks attached. There are many different social media tools and brands and they each have different purposes, audiences and ways to engage. To date we have only used one of these - Twitter.

## **Twitter**

Twitter is used to send short updates (maximum 200 characters) to a group of followers. KCC has been using Twitter since April. By 15 September 2009, KCC had 687 followers of its Twitter site. The site has proved a useful way of making information available to the general public and to the media.

The first KCC Twitter update, or Tweet, took place in April and 302 messages have been posted so far. On 12 May, the advantages of Twitter as a communication tool to use in emergency situations became clear.

During the incident at a school in Minster, when a heating duct fell from the ceiling, Twitter provided a way for KCC to keep parents and media organisations informed of what was happening, to pass on reassurance and advice that people could trust. It also eased some of the pressure on the media centre as some of the dozens of phone calls that would have come in were answered by the hourly Twitter updates.

In fact, by using Twitter this way, The Guardian newspaper was able to cover the incident without making contact with the media centre – while still getting KCC's message across. The approach was also recognised in the Local Government Chronicle magazine, which highlighted the value of getting messages to the media and the public at the same time, rather than relying on one to tell the other.

## **Understanding our public – the Kent & Medway Citizens' Panel**

In partnership with the Kent Messenger Group, KCC has established a new *Kent and Medway Citizens' Panel*, enabling us to seek the views of a large number of Kent residents aged 16 or over. The Panel marks a first in that it is the only citizens' panel in the country to be run jointly by a local newspaper and a local authority.

Last year two surveys were undertaken, the initial benchmark and recruitment survey and a subsequent snapshot survey. Results from these have been used to inform subsequent policy development, such as the *Backing Kent Business* and *Backing Kent People* campaigns. The Panel was also used earlier in 2009 to canvas the opinion of the public on KCC's ideas for the Sustainable Communities Act.

Membership of the Panel currently stands at around 700, which is still some way below the intended target of 5000 by 2011. KCC will continue to recruit new members in 2009/10. In the meantime we can survey up to 6,000 Kent residents as a result of our partnership with MORI who are developing the Citizens' Panel with us.

## **An interactive chamber**

No action has been taken on this in the last six months. However we have discussed the idea of holding a public debate in the Council Chamber on a

subject of strong interest to Kent residents. If we proceed with this idea it would give us an opportunity to see if we can build in an interactive element i.e. ask people watching the debate to email in comments and questions. More work is needed on this idea.

### **The main obstacle to good communication with our residents**

The greatest obstacle to good clear communication with our residents is the use of language by officers across KCC. Jargon, heavy use of acronyms and technical language are routinely used, even when we are communicating with the public. Let us give you one small example. An officer said vegetation had been installed. He meant trees had been planted.

A great deal of the material produced for the KCC website, for example, has an inward looking focus – the organisation explaining itself to itself. The website is our window on the world. It is where we tell Kent residents about the services we provide. Officers writing for the website need to put themselves in the shoes of the public and ask is this clear enough? Is this easy to understand and to use? Website material is written by officers from all the directorates. As stated before there are 8,000 pages and the communication and media team cannot check all these pages.

We held five workshops in June and July for the many colleagues at KCC who do some aspects of communication work. We made this point about use of language strongly and many colleagues agreed with our goal of making all communications – website pages and publications easier to understand. We will continue to challenge difficult and opaque language at KCC.

### **Attached:**

Appendix One – the three phases of the website project

Three front pages of Around Kent autumn/winter 2009