

By: Head of Democratic Services and Local Leadership
To: Selection and Member Services Committee – 4 July 2008
Subject: Modernising Democratic Services and Local Leadership

Summary: To note the ongoing modernisation programme for the Democratic Services and Local Leadership Unit and the engagement of Members and other stakeholders in order to bring about an excellent and continually improving service.

Unrestricted

Introduction

1. At its previous meeting on 14 March 2008, this Committee considered a report relating to the modernisation programme for Democratic Services Local Leadership in order to engage formally with elected Members as the key customer group for this Unit. The Committee's decisions were as follows:

- (a) the report be noted;
- (b) a questionnaire on Members' needs and how the Democratic Services and Local Leadership Unit might meet these needs be prepared for consideration at the Committee's next meeting; and
- (c) a "Member Development" Seminar be arranged for all Members during June and the agreed questionnaire be completed by Members following the Seminar.

Background

2. Following the retirement of the former Assistant to the Chief Executive and the Head of Democratic Services, the combined unit of Democratic Services and Local Leadership was formed earlier this year, with the new unit head taking up his post on 1 April 2008. There are a number of important challenges that the new Unit must meet in the coming months, all of which will help to deliver increased community engagement and accountability to the residents of Kent through elected Members and the decision making process. This report provides an update on each of the key areas mentioned in the previous report and also includes proposals for moving the service forward in order to provide an even better service to Members in their various roles.

3. The Audit Commission has recently published its final report following the Council's corporate assessment earlier this year. The following specific comments in the report relating to the roles of elected Members and the decision-making process generally need to be addressed:

- (a) Opposition Councillors have fewer opportunities for their views to be heard at a formative stage of policy than is usual (Executive Summary)
- (b) In the Council's membership, better-supported and earlier engagement of backbench councillors in decision-making and performance monitoring is needed, to build trust and openness and to ensure the views of all communities are fully heard before decisions are made (Area for improvement)
- (c) KCC has made some progress with its Going Local agenda but is aware that there is more to do (Ambition section)
- (d) Overview and scrutiny are improving but pre-decision scrutiny is underdeveloped and not independent enough of the executive (Capacity section)
- (e) Scrutiny is improving but there is considerable scope for a more inclusive approach. Policy Overview Committees are now normally attended by Portfolio-holders, which allows more opportunity to hold the Cabinet to account, and they have recently started to get six-monthly performance monitoring reports for their areas. Task and finish Select Committees and working groups are highly valued by councillors of all parties and have made important contributions to policy. But currently Overview is not independent enough of the Executive to be fully-effective in performing a wider scrutiny of policy development and ensuring this work has impact. The constitution is operated to clear the way for Cabinet decisions but in the process dissipates opposition input into over-used, and often ineffective, post-decision call-ins. Officers' capacity to support overview and scrutiny appears unusually small and can be a limiting factor in pre-decision debate. As a result opposition views are formulated and considered too late in the process to help the robust and inclusive development of policy and priorities (Capacity section)
- (f) Performance monitoring by the wider body of councillors is underdeveloped although improving. Presentation of performance monitoring information to councillors outside the Cabinet, while it has increased recently, remains unusually limited. Policy Overview Committees have in recent months taken on a six-monthly performance monitoring role, although their approach to and rigour in this is, so far, inconsistent. This is the only formal mechanism for presenting backbenchers with in-year performance information. There is no electronic 'dashboard' or regular reports for backbench and senior opposition members to monitor areas of individual interest, or performance more generally. The ability of backbench and opposition councillors to be alerted at an early stage to areas meriting scrutiny and challenge is therefore hampered. The new IT system will put the Council in a position to remedy this (Performance Management section).

Taking the Modernisation Forward

Embracing Technology

4. A computerised Committee Management System called modern.gov has been installed and is currently being used to produce agendas and Committee minutes. The system automates many of the tasks associated with the compilation of agendas, minutes, the forward plan etc and is able to publish committee information directly to KNet and KCC's website. Other features include:

- (a) A searchable database of Committee reports and minutes going back to 2001;
- (b) A calendar facility with links to Committee agendas;
- (c) Outlook Calendar integration – meeting dates and links can appear in Members and Officers outlook calendar automatically;
- (d) Members and members of the public can register to receive automatic e-mail alerts when information on a particular topic is published anywhere in the system;
- (e) Some automation of the processing of Cabinet Member decisions with a colour-coded decision tracking system;
- (f) Committee statistics can be produced from the system including records of Members attendance and an email alert if a Member has not attended for a specific period;
- (g) Automatic Committee proportionality calculator.

5. The modern.gov system will drive a great deal of the technological improvements that are needed to the internal workings of the Unit and, once all staff are comfortable with using the system, will help to build capacity to support Members in other areas. We are proceeding with a phased "go live" for the new system, which has already begun and will conclude in September. A handful of stylistic changes to the layout of agenda front sheets and reports are likely, which will provide more information about the Committee, especially to members of the public, most notably the membership of the committee and the quorum (see appended example). It will also be possible to send an electronic version of an entire agenda to the printers, which affords opportunities for both cost and time savings. Member consultation will be undertaken in relation to ceasing the use of coloured paper in agendas in order to realise some of these savings.

6. The extension of webcasting to other key Council meetings will help to spread participation and information about democracy to those people who are able to access the service over the internet. This service is particularly important given the sheer size of the County and the fact that many people would otherwise have to travel a long way to actually be present at meetings taking place at County Hall. There are a handful of minor technical issues that need to be addressed with the company that provides this service for the Council, although the imminent upgrade of the software will help to iron out some of these problems. There is also a balance that needs to be struck

between increasing the streaming speed of the webcast, which will result in a higher quality image, and potentially reducing access to the system by people with a slow broadband connection. There have also been concerns about the use of webcasting for the Planning Applications and Regulation Committees and a decision has been made not to webcast these two meetings at the present time. Discussions with relevant Members and Officers are ongoing.

7. Initial discussions have been held with the webcasting company about exploring links with Kent TV. This could involve a regular, say monthly, feature on local democracy and the decision-making process with a short programme and commentary showing the progress of a particular key issue through the decision-making process, interspersed with extracts from the webcasts of various meetings, e.g. Cabinet, Cabinet Scrutiny and full Council. The programme will help to explain to viewers the reasons why some matters need to be considered by more than one Member-level body and the different perspectives that each type of meeting has on the issue. Care would need to be taken that the content wasn't party political, yet explained these different perspectives. Kent TV could also be used to publicise the outcomes of certain Select Committee reports, once they have been considered by the full Council, such as Alcohol Misuse or Flooding in Kent, to help inform, advise and support our residents.

8. It is also proposed to undertake a complete review of the web pages relating to the decision-making process, including local boards/neighbourhood forums in order to make these important pages more user-friendly and accessible. This will include on-line grant application forms and could also be extended to include e-consultation as part of the scrutiny and policy development processes and e-discussions between the public and elected Members using blog/discussion forum technology. The unit has already trialled video-conferencing with colleagues in Bristol City Council for a Select Committee evidence gathering session and this worked effectively.

Support and Development for Members

9. With County Council elections less than a year away, planning has already begun in relation to the induction arrangements for new Members. The Member Development function sits with the Personnel and Development unit, but the Head of Democratic Services and Local Leadership will seek to influence the induction process and Member Development generally, from his previous experience in other Councils. Feedback from all Members, particularly those who were new KCC Members in 2005 about the induction arrangements will also be acted on. Specifically, it is hoped that there will be more opportunities for Members to visit KCC facilities and meet key staff and service users, as opposed to there being too many classroom-style presentations. Having said that, training on the Member Code of Conduct and ethical standards should be made compulsory for all Members and this has to be delivered in a formal setting, as would one or two other training events, although these would be made as interactive and enjoyable as possible.

10. Member Development needs should be assessed on an individual basis, depending on the Member's own professional and civic experience, which Committees he or she has been appointed to serve on and the various roles that Members have, i.e. decision-making, overview and scrutiny, policy

development, frontline councillor, civic and ceremonial responsibilities. Support to Members in the greater use of technology is also likely to be required to varying degrees. The submission to full Council of the Member Development Policy in September will be a key milestone in the pursuit of excellence in this area and it remains the Council's aim to achieve the South East Employers' Member Development Charter by April 2009.

11. Colleagues in Personnel and Development are in the process of drafting a Member Development Programme, which will be considered initially by the IMG on Member Development. The Committee is also advised that, in addition to the sum of £10,000 that was transferred from Democratic Services to Personnel and Development to fund Member Development from the beginning of the 2008/09 financial year, a bid is likely to be made to increase this budget, to be funded by the underspend on last year's revenue budget. This will be considered by the Cabinet at its meeting on 14 July.

12. The recommendations that are likely to be made by the Member Information Informal Member Group will also be key in improving the overall service to Members in their various roles. Of particular significance is the timeliness of the supply of relevant information to County Members about what is happening in their electoral divisions. A number of Members have commented that they can often find out more about what the County Council is doing in their locality from their District/Borough Council, rather than the County Council itself. Opportunities to reduce the amount of information but increase the targeting of certain information in different forms should also be seized. A discreet Members' area of KNet should be developed with key information about both County and District/Borough services within County electoral divisions. This could also contain demographic information about different parts of the County, a list of frequently asked questions and answers and a number of carefully selected hyperlinks to other parts of the Council's website, such as Committee agendas and reports. An A to Z service directory for Members should also be available, with named officer contacts for Members' enquiries.

13. Benchmarking work is underway to compare the Council's Members' Allowances scheme with our statistical neighbours and other authorities, with a view to preparing a report for the Independent Remuneration Panel in the autumn. The Panel will be asked to consider whether any changes to the current scheme of Members' Allowances are either necessary or appropriate for the beginning of the new Council term from May 2009 onwards. Once the initial benchmarking is completed, the views of the 3 Group Leaders will be sought formally, so that their views feature in the Panel's review. Part of this review will focus on the most appropriate way of providing IT and other equipment for Members.

Overview and Scrutiny

14. The views of the Audit Commission will be important drivers in reflecting on the current structure and operating principles of Overview and Scrutiny within the authority. The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) toolkit is an excellent starting place to assess the effectiveness of the Council's scrutiny function and benchmark KCC against many other authorities. A seminar is suggested for Members, key partners and senior officers to debate the current arrangements

and whether a slightly different approach is needed in order to respond constructively to the Audit Commission recommendations. If supported, this seminar could be chaired jointly between the authority and an external agency, such as the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) or the CfPS.

15. There are a number of key areas worth exploring in further detail:

- The earlier involvement of non-executive Members in policy-making through the Policy Overview Committees
- A more effective pre-decision scrutiny process, perhaps involving a re-alignment of the timing of the Cabinet and Cabinet Scrutiny Committees
- A more consistent and rigorous approach to the consideration of financial and non-financial performance monitoring information, leading to better intelligence about possible future scrutiny activity
- An ongoing assessment of the resources available to support Overview and Scrutiny, particularly given the demand for Select Committee work
- Whether certain aspects of health scrutiny could be done in conjunction with the District/Borough Councils or delegated to them

16. Member Development in relation to scrutiny is also an essential component of any review. A targeted approach to examining chairing skills, questioning techniques for both pre and post decision scrutiny, negotiation and mediation skills should all be available.

Localism

17. The unit will take the lead at officer level in furthering the Council's approach to localism, following the Council decision on 19 June. This will involve the preparation of a specific consultation pack for each District/Borough area to help guide the discussions that will be led by Cabinet Members in developing bespoke solutions for local arrangements.

18. A phased approach to the implementation of the revised models will be pursued, with the aim of completing the review by the end of the current Municipal Year, subject to resources and the appointment process for additional Community Liaison Managers and support staff.

19. As indicated above, a simultaneous review of the web pages for local boards and the grants process is already being undertaken. The revised Member Development programme must also reflect the support needed for Members in their roles as frontline councillors, not just in relation to being members of local boards/neighbourhood forums, but in terms of engaging dynamically with our residents informally through a variety of channels including electronic media.

Internal Management Arrangements

20. A number of work streams are being pursued in relation to improving the internal management of the Unit. There are a number of officers with long service at KCC, particularly within the Democratic Services team. This is positive in terms of the unit having high levels of experience and local knowledge, but less so in terms of the capacity, expertise and exposure of officers at lower levels, and the willingness amongst some to embrace new ideas and approaches. Effective succession planning will be vital to ensure a continuing high quality service to Members in their various roles. The unit head is considering whether further, limited changes to the staffing structure will assist with both the succession and service quality issues.

21. Staff in the Unit already engage, network, and participate in a number of cross Authority working groups throughout the South East. The unit head has a number of connections with local authorities and public sector organisations in London and is looking at these and other areas to establish best practice and innovation, which might be worth exploring for KCC. It is important to not only capture and incorporate the best practice from elsewhere, but to also be able to benchmark KCC's services against that practice, to plot its progress against it using clear, measurable and comparable data. The unit head will lead on a wide range of benchmarking activity over the coming months and the results of these exercises will be reported back to this Committee. The unit head also proposes to review and increase the number of local performance indicators to measure the ongoing effectiveness of the unit.

22. It is a key priority of the unit head to focus on dealing responsibly and effectively with absence management. During 2007/08, the former Democratic Services and Members' Services teams lost a total number of 231 days through absence, which equates to one entire working year. Whilst there will always be unavoidable reasons for absence, the 2007/08 figure included a relatively high proportion of self-certified absence and there will be a specific focus by the unit head and his managers in maintaining an effective focus on supporting staff and managing individual cases in line with KCC policies.

23. It is also proposed to bring together key administrative, secretarial and support staff who are currently responsible for supporting individual teams within the unit to form a business support team to better cope with the frequent variations in workloads across the unit. The new team, comprising existing staff, will be responsible for budget and performance monitoring, processing individual Cabinet Member decisions, the forward plan, and the key business processes needed for the unit to function effectively.

24. The additional staff being employed to support the roll out of the localism arrangements and the scrutiny function will mean a review of office accommodation within the Unit and this is underway.

Raising the Profile of the Unit

25. It is important that the Unit continues to enhance and improve its profile, both internally and externally. By tackling all of the initiatives and objectives mentioned above and excelling in all that the Unit does, our profile and reputation will be enhanced. It is also worth mentioning that the unit is also participating in the Kent Show this year, with a range of information about encouraging people to become better informed and involved in democracy. It is also proposed to seek better publicity for the excellent work done by the local boards and neighbourhood forums, particularly in making grants for local initiatives. Finally, it is also proposed to enhance and extend the Unit's advocacy role within KCC, in terms of assisting colleagues in other Directorates with the rules relating to the Forward Plan, the decision-making process, guidance to officers writing reports etc.

Conclusion

26. The Democratic Services and Local Leadership Unit is in good shape to move forward on the various work streams outlined in this paper, with the ultimate aim of ensuring that the service to Members in their various roles is excellent in all areas and recognised as such both regionally and nationally. The unit had its first away day on 23 June at Oakwood House, where all staff were given the opportunity to express their views on the proposed way forward. The away day was a success and a number of suggestions and ideas were forthcoming that will contribute to the development of the Unit. The continued commitment and support of Members, together with the ongoing investment in the Unit will also be essential if the modernisation programme is to succeed.

Recommendation:

27. The Committee is asked to note the on-going programme to modernise the Democratic Service and Local Leadership Unit and comment accordingly.

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ADULT SOCIAL SERVICES POLICY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

Friday 30 May 2008 at 10.00am

Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall Maidstone, Kent ME14 1XQ

QUORUM: 5

Membership (15)

Conservative (10): Mr L B Ridings (Chairman), Mrs A D Allen, Mr M J Angell, Mr J Curwood, Mr C G Findlay, Mr T Gates, Mr C Hibberd, Mr D A Hirst, Mr M J Northey and Dr T R Robinson.

Labour (4): Mr T A Maddison (Vice-Chairman), Mr L Christie, Ms C J Cribbon and Mrs M Newell

Liberal Democrat (1): Mr S J G Koowaree (Spokesman)

**The attendance of the above Members is requested at the above meeting
The agenda for the meeting is overleaf**

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Wednesday, 21 May 2008

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ADULT SOCIAL SERVICES POLICY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

Friday 30 May 2008 at 10.00am

Order of Business

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EXEMPT ITEMS

(At the time of preparing the agenda there were no exempt items. During any such items which may arise the meeting is likely NOT to be open to the public)

Please note that any background documents referred to in the accompanying papers maybe inspected by arrangement with the officer responsible for preparing the relevant report.