

From: Barbara Cooper, Corporate Director for Growth, Environment and Transport

To: Mike Whiting, Cabinet Member for Economic Development

Subject: Kent County Council's participation in the Straits Committee

Non-Key decision: 20/00096

Electoral Division: Countywide

Summary: This report provides an overview of the participation of Kent County Council in the Straits Committee. This is a new, voluntary partnership between Kent County Council and neighbouring Belgian, Dutch and French local authorities to pursue lasting good neighbourly relations and create opportunities for mutual benefit for businesses, residents, local stakeholders and communities.

The report sets out the decision requirement to confirm Kent County Council's membership of the Straits Committee. It provides background to the development of the Straits Committee, the priorities going forward and the arrangements being developed to support joint initiatives between the participating areas. Initial priorities include the development of a strategy for the Straits Committee; the hosting of a Straits conference in Kent; the setting up of joint working groups in specific policy areas; and the setting up of a small project support scheme.

Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development is asked to agree to:

Confirm the participation of Kent County Council in the Straits Committee

Approve funding of £100,000 from reserves for activities connected to the Straits Committee. These will include support to joint initiatives on economic development, tackling climate change, supporting young people and any initiatives in other policy areas as agreed within the Straits Committee; the development of a strategy for the Straits Committee; the hosting of a Straits conference in Kent; and the setting up of a small project support scheme.

Agree delegated authority for management of that funding to the Director of Economic Development in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Economic Development.

1. The Straits Committee: Introduction and decision requirement

1.1 The Straits Committee is a new, voluntary partnership between Kent County Council and neighbouring Belgian, Dutch and French local authorities bordering the Dover Straits and the Channel-North Sea area. The aim is to initiate a new, flexible and efficient way of working together to create opportunities for mutual benefit and pursue lasting good neighbourly relations.

- 1.2 Following the advice of the General Counsel and with the approval of the Leader, the Cabinet Member for Economic Development signed a Memorandum of Understanding in February 2020 for the creation of the Straits Committee. While this does not place any legal requirements on Kent County Council, the principle of KCC's involvement in the Straits Committee should be confirmed by an Executive Decision by the Cabinet Member for Economic Development. This will show that Kent County Council's participation is in line with its own governance. It will also show that it intends to abide by any arrangements concluded for the effective functioning of the Straits Committee between signatory authorities.
- 1.3 Kent County Council's participation in the Straits Committee will lead to spend activity. The Executive Decision confirms funding approval and the relevant delegation of authority. This report sets out where budget will be deployed.

2. Background to the creation of the Straits Committee

- 2.1 Kent County Council has had longstanding relations, underpinned by memoranda of understanding, with the neighbouring continental local authorities of the Hauts-de-France region (France); the Département of Pas-de-Calais (France); and the Belgian Province of West Flanders. These relationships have led to many joint initiatives over time in areas such as trade, tourism, education, social care, transport and the environment, and these initiatives have often been supported by cross-border funding mechanisms.
- 2.2 Following the UK's decision to leave the European Union, a series of discussions between Kent County Council, its continental neighbours and other near neighbouring authorities, took place from 2018 to 2020. These meetings underlined the strong, shared commitment to continuing cross-Channel local-to-local cooperation where it may be of mutual benefit. They also recognised that, as the framework under which cooperation had developed would change after the United Kingdom left the European Union, cross-Channel relationships needed to evolve to reflect the changing circumstances.
- 2.3 Kent was encouraged by the UK diplomatic service to formalise a new relationship with its neighbours and, as a result, Kent County Council and the Département of Pas-de-Calais received a small Foreign and Commonwealth Office grant in 2019 to develop a proposal for member-led, cross-border Committee. Neighbouring authorities from France, Belgium and the Netherlands subsequently agreed to join the initiative at a meeting chaired by the Leader at County Hall in October 2019.
- 2.4 On 5th February 2020, the Straits Committee was launched with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) at the headquarters of the Département of Pas-de-Calais in Arras, France. The signatory authorities entered into an arrangement to develop a shared, forward-looking vision for the cross-border Straits area. This included giving priority to joint work on economic development and fluidity of trade; climate change and clean growth; and supporting young people.

3. Straits Committee working arrangements

- 3.1 The Straits Committee intends to provide a flexible, member-led framework under which relations may be developed between neighbouring cross-border areas. Summarised below are the working arrangements reflected in the Memorandum of Understanding and elaborated on by the terms of reference agreed for its “Executive Committee”. These two documents are appended to this report.
- 3.2 The signatories to the Memorandum of Understanding are the Départements of Nord and of Pas de Calais (France); the Provinces of East and West Flanders (Belgium); the Province of Zeeland (The Netherlands); and Kent County Council. The Hauts-de-France region, while not a formal signatory, takes part as an observer.
- 3.3 The Straits Committee’s central component is a cross-authority working group of local elected members known as the “Executive Committee”. Each authority has designated a cabinet member to sit on this Committee: Kent County Council’s representative is the Cabinet Member for Economic Development.
- 3.4 Each authority may bring before this “Executive Committee” challenges and opportunities where they feel there may be a tangible benefit from working together. The Executive Committee, scheduled to meet up to four times a year, will then consider what the authorities can do within their respective responsibilities to advance the issues under consideration. The Committee members aim to make conclusions and recommendations by consensus.
- 3.5 The elected members on the Executive Committee are supported by designated officers in each signatory authority. These officers will prepare for meetings for the Executive Committee and follow up agreed action points between the elected members. Two officers within Economic Development provide the Kent secretariat, coordinating closely as and where required with external bodies in Kent and internally with KCC divisions.
- 3.6 The Memorandum of Understanding creating the Straits Committee also commits the signatories to holding an annual public conference that will be open widely to stakeholders from across the Straits area. This will look at opportunities for the area and act as a forum for creating new relations and partnerships. The members intend to hold the first conference in 2021.
- 3.7 The Straits Committee does not have delegated authority. The working arrangements are entered into voluntarily and, as set out in the Memorandum of Understanding, each participating authority must comply with its own governance in taking part in the Straits Committee.
- 3.8 The signatory authorities intend to offer a clear, open process for possible enlargement once work to agree a shared vision and strategy has been completed. The Province of South Holland (The Netherlands) and Essex County Council have both expressed an interest in the Committee.

4. Priorities for the Straits Committee

- 4.1 The Executive Committee was inaugurated in March and met again in July, in a format combining virtual and physical participation, to set the direction for joint working. We set out below the main activities of work and the implications for resourcing.
- 4.2 **The development of a shared vision and strategy:** This is a short piece of work to develop a shared vision that sets out clearly and concisely the purpose and intentions of the Committee to internal and external audiences, including prospective new members. The document should act as an advocacy tool for the Straits Committee to gain support from higher levels of government for continued investment in joint working.
- 4.3 The production of the strategy is being overseen by the Province of West Flanders with the support of all Straits partners. Work should be completed in early 2021.
- 4.4 **The creation of a small project support initiative:** The Straits Committee authorities have agreed to work together to set up a small project support initiative. The aim is to help local organisations work with partners in neighbouring Straits areas on projects that promote and strengthen good-neighbourly relations and deliver tangible benefits. The scheme proposal, which is set out in more detail in the annex, is intended to have a joint bidding and evaluation process. However, each participating Straits authority will be responsible for contracting and monitoring successful bidders in their area. We intend to model the Kent component on the well-established processes used in the monitoring and administration of the Combined Members' Grant Scheme.
- 4.5 The Straits authorities are working together to have this scheme in place for the beginning of 2021. Further details are provided in the annex.
- 4.6 **The setting up of cross-border working groups:** The members agreed to set up a series of cross-border working groups in specified areas where key stakeholders can come together and initiate ideas for joint working. As and when project initiatives emerge with strong business cases, the intention is to work together to see how these could be brought forward to delivery.
- 4.7 A first working group on tourism recovery was held in early June. This brought together destination management organisations from across the Straits area, including Visit Kent, to share best practice on preparing business for reopening and to discuss the potential for working together to promote each other's markets. Further discussions between the destination management agencies are planned for September with a view to agreeing a joint programme in the Autumn.
- 4.8 A second working group on innovation is planned. This will look at ways to link up research strengths within the Straits area to encourage new cross-sectoral networks and partnerships to emerge. The Cabinet Member for Economic Development oversaw an informal consultation of key organisations involved in supporting innovation in Kent during the Summer. The priorities identified will

now be analysed and fed into a proposal to be coordinated by the Province of West Flanders during the Autumn.

- 4.9 Further working groups are planned to focus on young people and climate change in the coming months. Several “bottom-up” project ideas involving young people and secondary schools working across borders are, however, already under development. These include a fully-funded, French international work placement scheme where Kent is helping Pas-de-Calais find new placement hosts in Kent; the establishment of the Hardelot Centre as Education Tourism Hub; and an annual festival celebrating the culture and history of France and England from ‘cave men’ to the present time. This will promote local artisans, museums historic sites, local producers, especially those who specialise in traditional gastronomy.
- 4.10 **The organisation of a first annual Straits conference:** The Cabinet Member for Economic Development has put Kent forward to host the first annual Straits conference in 2021. This would bring stakeholders together from across the Straits area to debate challenges and opportunities for the Straits area and create new partnerships.
- 4.11 With the continuing uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, a flexible proposal will be brought forward in the Autumn to allow for the delivery of this conference under different scenarios and in different formats. These scenarios will include different hybrid options of virtual and face-to-face interactions. We will also continue to explore the possibility of a full face-to-face conference should the health situation and removal of travel restrictions allow this to be considered.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 Kent County Council will make £100,000 available from reserves to support activities connected to the Straits Committee.

6. Legal implications

- 6.1 There are no legal implications arising for Kent County Council from the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding to create the Straits Committee.

7. Equalities implications

- 7.1 An initial screening of Kent’s participation in the Straits Committee has evaluated the planned activities as having low or no impact.

8. Other corporate implications

- 8.1 Participation in the Straits Committee complements existing service and directorate-led initiatives where partnerships and projects with organisations in neighbouring European territories have been established to identify innovations that can be brought back into policy and service delivery.
- 8.2 During the development of the Straits concept, the views of Directorate Management Teams as to future priorities for cooperation were sought. The Straits Committee will continue to link positively with directorates and their

services to provide a vehicle for enabling further cooperation where it may add value to existing initiatives.

Governance

- 8.3 It is proposed that authority is delegated to the Director of Economic Development, in consultation with the Cabinet member for Economic Development to take appropriate actions to implement Kent's participation in the Straits Committee, including arrangements for the awarding of grant payments in line with the Growth Environment and Transport Directorate's Scheme of Delegation.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1 This report has set out the background to Kent's membership of the Straits Committee, the initial priorities identified by the participating areas, and the arrangements made to support joint initiatives. As the framework governing relationships at a national level evolves, the Straits Committee provides a flexible and efficient way for Kent to work with its neighbouring continental local authorities. This will contribute to maintaining good neighbourly cross-Channel relations and creating opportunities for mutually beneficial outcomes.

10. Recommendation(s):

- 10.1 The Cabinet Member for Economic Development is asked to agree to:
- Confirm the participation of Kent County Council in the Straits Committee
 - Approve funding of £100,000 from reserves for activities connected to the Straits Committee. These will include support to joint initiatives on economic development, tackling climate change, supporting young people and any initiatives in other policy areas as agreed within the Straits Committee; the development of a strategy for the Straits Committee; the hosting of a Straits conference in Kent; and the setting up of a small project support scheme.
 - Agree delegated authority for management of that funding to the Director of Economic Development in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Economic Development.

11. Background Documents

- 11.1 The following background documents are appended to this report

11.1.1 Memorandum of Understanding: Creation of the Straits Committee

11.1.2 Straits Committee: Executive Committee Terms of Reference

11.1.3 Straits Committee: Launch conference report 5th February 2020.

11.1.4 Straits Committee: Small project initiative explanatory note

12. Contact details

<p>Report Authors: Dafydd Pugh & Myriam Caron Name and job title: Project manager (Brussels); European Partnerships Manager Telephone number: 03000 417157 Email address: dafydd.pugh@kent.gov.uk; myriam.caron@kent.gov.uk</p>	<p>Relevant Director: David Smith Name and job title: Director of Economic Development Telephone number 03000 417176 Email address: David.smith2@kent.gov.uk</p>
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