

## Local Government First Magazine Article

### Thinking of reducing investment on Member Development? Don't do it! – says Kent County Council (working title)

In September, Kent County Council became one of the latest County Councils to achieve the South East Employers (SEE) Member Development Charter. Councillor Rory Love, Chairman of SEE said that Kent CC “recognises that development of all members is critical to the successful achievement and delivery of strategic priorities on behalf of the people they represent and serve”.

Kent's Deputy Leader, Alex King says that funding Member Development isn't just about helping Members to understand new policies and emerging legislation; chair meetings effectively or come across well during a media interview. He asserts that there is a clear and obvious link between well-developed Members and delivering better services for residents. Helping Members to understand the needs of different communities and communicate those needs into local services is a key part of Members' roles.

In recent years, Kent CC has invested positively in their Member Development strategy, driven from the top by Mr King, who chairs the cross-party Member Development Group. Mr King's Project Group is charged with ensuring that at all times the group delivers on the following objectives:

- A proactive and constant refocusing of Member development to meet the key challenges facing the Council
- Respond to the ongoing organisational change within the Council
- Reflect the strong member led culture of the Council and the nature of Officer/Member relationships.
- Ensure flexibility in Member development and training to meet the fast changing priorities in local government.
- Ensure all members are up to date on recommended programmes and that they are being delivered to the required standard
- Develop a strong partnership approach to member development, involving District Councils, neighbouring unitary Authorities and other partners as appropriate.

Mr King says “Members have a vital role to play in the changing landscape of democracy. It is essential that we all have the skills to play a leading role in our communities”.

New legislation on localism will only serve to heighten the importance and impact of the local Member in terms of leading communities to better shape local services as the size of the state shrinks and more control is in the hands of local people. Kent CC wants to be one of the first local authorities to grasp

the opportunity to control more public sector spend in its area and its new medium term plan 'Bold Steps for Kent', due to be adopted by the Council in December, seeks to turn that ambition into challenging but achievable objectives over the next 4 years. Supporting and developing Members as community leaders during that transition is crucial to its success.

Kent's Group Managing Director Katherine Kerswell says "Having recently joined the County Council, I have been impressed by the commitment of both elected Members and officers to the Charter's principles. The timing is perfect as we head into stormy waters; our Members will be faced with increasingly challenging situations. Community Leadership is paramount and the Charter has been a real drive to equip our Members with the right skills in all situations".

Kent CC recommends the Charter to other Councils as it provides a clear framework for leading Member Development in the Council.

Kent is now actively pursuing Charter Plus, but they are not doing so to get another framed certificate for the Chairman's office; the goal here is to equip their Members to be the fulcrum in Kent's Big Society by re-engineering community involvement. In an ocean of budget reductions in the public sector, reducing the effort on developing Members is regarded by Kent CC as short sighted and adds risk to the achievement of Council's medium term plan.