

State of the Borough Debate

7pm, 26th November 2009, Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford



Leader's Statement



Ashford Borough Council works with many partners to deliver a wide range of services and opportunities.

We are recognised by central government as one of the most efficient councils in England and a recent independent survey told us that over 84% of residents are satisfied or very satisfied with the area as a place to live.

Like everybody else the council is affected by the recession with

reduced income from services it charges for such as property searches, car parking, building control and planning fees. It is therefore a challenge for us to deliver services within the budgets we have to provide them. However, we can do better and we are determined to offer even better value for money.

What follows is an overview of some of the key services and initiatives that the council, or the council together with partners, has been responsible for over the last year, as well as the challenges we face going forward. The points covered in this summary will hopefully stimulate questions for inclusion and discussion at the State of the Borough Debate on 26th November 2009.

Beating the recession

For the most part our borough has managed to defy the economic downturn.

Sadly, some residents have lost their livelihoods but our employment figures have not seen the major shifts some of our neighbours have suffered and being able to attract new business such as Waitrose to our borough has created new job opportunities.

As well as helping to keep Ashford's plans for growth on track we have been able to offer practical help and advice to local people and support the local business community in a number of ways:

- We are working with others to provide opportunities for real work experience for local long term unemployed young people through the Future Jobs Fund.
- Housing Plus, our recently launched advice service offers help and information on housing, employment, debt and much more.

- We use local contractors and labour whenever possible on our regeneration projects.
- We have placed more resources in services where there is an increase in demand such as housing and benefits.
- We support many local voluntary organisations and charities in numerous ways, including the local Citizens Advice Bureau.
- We continue to support one to one business start up advice through the local chamber of commerce.
- The Ashford's Future partners continue to progress major infrastructure projects which encourage the private sector to invest in Ashford as the economy recovers.
- We continue to provide support for housing developers through the government's Kick Start programme and work on flexible developer contributions to keep projects moving forward. We also work with developers and partners to help existing firms to expand or relocate within the borough as well as attracting new companies and jobs.

Future Challenges

Our Corporate Plan aims to make sure services are responsive and to ensure our resources are managed within the budget set. This means taking action to compensate for pressures when they arise. While we are making every effort to maintain our current service provision we cannot rule out having to make changes in the future.

We will continue to monitor the effects of the downturn on services and the borough as a whole and seek ways to alleviate its effects both on our services and our local communities.



Good quality and affordable homes

The council is the borough's biggest landlord with over 5,000 homes and 1,900 garages.

- All our council owned homes meet the national Decent Homes Standard putting us well ahead of the majority of other local authorities.
- The £150m Stanhope Private Finance Initiative is well on the way to transforming the local community. Council home refurbishment work is ahead of schedule with 280 out of 323 homes completed.
- In Kennington a £1.5m programme to regenerate ten blocks of flats and surrounding open spaces in Bybrook is almost complete.

- We continue to work with partners to provide affordable homes in rural locations. With 266 homes our borough has the largest number of affordable local needs rural homes in Kent.
- Government confidence in our Housing Service is evident. Ashford is only 1 of 4 councils in the southeast to be awarded a recent grant of £1.7m to provide more affordable housing and a £320k grant to run a new housing advice service.

Future Challenges

With the effects of the recession still being felt and a growing population we are aware of an increasing need for social housing and will continue to work with partner organisations and government to address these needs.



Keeping the Borough moving

Ashford already has excellent transport links however further transport projects and improvements are key to Ashford's future growth and prosperity. We are working with transport providers and highways agencies to ensure these projects are delivered.

- The new high speed train which brings Ashford just 37 minutes from London has had an excellent take up in advance of the introduction of full services in December. The preview services have generated a great deal of national interest in Ashford as a place to live and in which to invest.
- The £16m Kent County Council led shared space scheme has become an important location around which future development in the town centre will happen. We have also seen an improved safety record since it opened a year ago with no reported

accidents, and councils across the country are now looking to adopt a similar 'shared space' approach.

- Government approval has been given for the go ahead for a new motorway junction 10a from the M20 and improvements to Junction 9 and nearby Drovers Roundabout will be completed by 2011.
- Planning permission has been agreed and £16.5m government forward funding secured for the Victoria Way link road.
- A bid to secure funding for SmartLink is well underway. This new high quality public transport system will link the town centre with key residential and employment areas, will help reduce congestion, improve the environment and offer improved travel choices for Ashford residents.
- The borough's extensive network of cycle routes continues to expand linking the town centre, schools, the international station and main employment areas.



Future Challenges

Better public transport is an important part of Ashford's future and will help our local contribution towards tackling climate change. It is important that we balance the needs for car users in what is a predominantly rural borough with the importance of encouraging the use of public transport, cycling and walking especially in the town.

Building healthier, happier, safer lives

Ashford Borough Council works closely with other organisations to make the borough a better place to live, work and enjoy.

- Our residents enjoy some of the safest streets in the county and perception of crime and anti social behaviour is lower in Ashford than any other borough in Kent.
- We support St Mary's Church's proposals to refurbish this important town centre building create a flexible multi-use space for arts and community activity.
- The innovative and award winning £2m Singleton Environment Centre attracted over 10,000 visitors last year.
- We have invested in recent years to provide some of the finest facilities for sport and leisure in Kent by refurbishing the Stour Centre, providing new sports facilities at Courtside and Pitchside, improving sports and play facilities in Victoria Park and improving other parks, play areas and open spaces.
- We run successful projects aimed at encouraging people to enjoy physical activity and healthy lifestyles, including the Active Ashford Partnership, and have secured funding from our partners at the Primary Care Trust to provide free swimming for certain groups through our Active Swim programme. We are now expanding the project to include further groups.
- The Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership continues to work together to reduce crime and disorder in Ashford.
- We support a vibrant local Arts programme of festivals and musical events right across the whole Borough including the successful "Summer Sounds" and a now revitalised Carnival.
- The council prides itself on working with and empowering young people through our growing number of youth forums and our youth conference.

Future Challenges

We have achieved a great deal of improvement in both the quality and range of cultural and leisure facilities right across the Borough over recent years.

But we are far from complacent and will continue our ambition to find a niche for Ashford and push forward the cultural and arts agenda in a way that does not compete with facilities provided nearby. To achieve this we must work increasingly with our partner organisations and external funders to find creative and innovative ways of meeting community aspirations.

Given the economic climate, reduction in income and resources at many of our facilities and a growing reliance on support from external partners, it is a big challenge to maintain and develop services to meet the needs of a growing population.



Singleton Environment Centre

Our environment

Ashford Borough Council is working hard to protect and improve the local environment and reduce our collective carbon footprint.

- We require all new homes to meet the challenging standards set out in our Local Development Framework including generating at least 20% of energy needs from renewable energy sources on site such as wind, sun and ground heat.
- We incorporate energy efficiency measures when council owned homes are refurbished and we work with partners to promote schemes such as Warmfront to help people reduce their fuel bills.
- We work with partners to deliver the Kent Waste Strategy. This year we expect to spend £2.1 million

collecting more than 33 thousand tonnes of domestic waste from local resident's homes.

- This year we expect to spend over £1.2m emptying litter bins and cleaning the borough's streets.
- We also run the 'blue box' recycling scheme for 28,000 homes, mainly in the urban areas, and with other recycling initiatives saw over 9,000 tonnes of household waste recycled last year.
- Mid Kent Water has invested £24m in a 35km mains pipeline from Bewl Water to supply thousands of new homes and commercial properties in Ashford.

Future Challenges

We are all still producing too much rubbish. A growing population, too much packaging and a general increase in how much we all throw away, places added pressures on our waste and recycling budgets. We aim to increase our recycling levels by 10% over the next three to four years.

The current financial pressures mean we are unable to expand our blue box recycling scheme and have had to suspend our successful separate green waste collection service for the foreseeable future.



Summary

Despite the difficult economic climate we will continue to provide quality services and tackle issues local people recognise as priorities.

We aim to build on our proven track record of delivering services in ways that will improve them and achieve even better value for money.

We will continue to work with our partners to deliver on the promise in our Corporate Plan to "protect and improve the quality of life of every resident of the Borough, now and in the future."

Paul Clokie
Leader, Ashford Borough Council

Do you have a question about any of the issues raised in this statement? Would you like it discussed at the State of the Borough Debate? Submit your question online www.ashford.gov.uk/stateoftheboroughdebate or complete the form below. Questions must be received by 12 noon, 18th November.

Name: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____ Phone (optional): _____

Question: _____

Tick if you wish to receive further information from Ashford Borough Council and partners involved in the plans for the growth of Ashford.

Send this form to: State of the Borough Debate, Ashford Borough Council, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford TN23 1PL