Planning Peer Challenge
Ashford Borough Council
14-16 February 2018
Feedback Report
1. Executive Summary

Ashford is experiencing higher than average economic growth and is recognised regionally and nationally as a growth area of strategic importance. Historically this growth was due to the opening of the Channel Tunnel and, more recently, with the high speed rail route from London to mainland Europe via Ashford.

Ashford Borough Council fully understands this context and is prioritising the shaping of growth for the best interests of residents and businesses. Most growth is located in the urban area which increased its population by 23 per cent from 2001 to 2011. This is significantly higher growth than the Kent, South East or national averages and is due to a mix of in migration, attracted by cheaper housing than London (average house prices being 34 per cent cheaper), and excellent high speed train links (37 minutes from Ashford to London St Pancras). It also includes a significant level of inward investment and in migration of employees, with their families, to work in the area.

The council recognises the importance of planning at strategic and operational levels to shape and deliver growth. The Corporate Plan has priorities for economic investment and quality housing, for which planning has a central role. However, the Plan’s other two priorities – health and leisure and countryside, tourism and heritage – also depend on planning’s involvement. Planning’s central role is recognised by members and officers and evidenced by the council having continuous local plan coverage for more than 30 years. The council’s strategic responsibility for planning lies with the Director of Place and Space – the job title confirming the focus of this wide-ranging brief.

The council and planning are ‘open for business’. This was confirmed to the peer team by developers, is evidenced by the high level of planning permissions and by the impressive level of delivery against the Big 8 major development projects that were established as a corporate target in 2015. A number of these have been delivered and many are imminent. The Strategic Project Delivery Board, established by the council to bring partners together to plan delivery, is the key body overseeing their implementation. Many projects have been enabled by direct council involvement to ‘de-risk’ development. For example, the council granted £3m towards the new Ashford College that leveraged £18m of partner funding to complete this development.

Design has been given a high priority by the council and the peer team considered this to be good practice. This ethos contributes towards high quality public realm and quality built development, which not only improves the environment but helps attract future investment.

Partners are very positive about working with the council. This includes South East Local Enterprise Partnership and Kent County Council who recognise Ashford’s strategic importance to the regional and national economy. However, these partners also appreciate that the council and planning delivers and this provides confidence, from them and inward investors, to work with it.

With delivery of the Big 8 being imminent, a challenge for the council will be to define what the next set of big projects might be and to ensure that planning has the resources to support both strategic ambition and operational day-to-day activity.
Expectations of planning can be high and, at times, unrealistic. Ashford is a desirable area to live and features strongly in the Halifax Quality of Life Survey (top 10 per cent in 2014). It is the largest and most rural borough in Kent and this is a factor for residents and members in taking a keen interest in planning matters. However, this interest can also lead to misunderstanding what planning can and cannot do. The council should continue to explain this function so that member and community expectations can be more firmly grounded on what is achievable.

Community engagement is a strength of planning and is important given the sensitivity of planning decisions, particularly in rural areas. It will be important to ensure that this level of engagement continues as growth is pursued. However, it will also be important to ensure that the feedback loop be closed whenever possible so that residents feel that their views are being taken account of during consultation and before decisions are made.

Since 2015 the council has given, prompted by the concerns of members, an increased priority to enforcement. With the benefit of additional resources the service is making effective use of high court injunctions, has developed a good practice out of hours pack and is well equipped to deliver a robust service.

The planning service is strategically important to lead on economic growth. In addition it is demonstrating good practice in a number of operational areas. These include:

- an annual monitoring report to council on s.106 agreements, their value and the areas that this has been spent on
- a deferred s.106 contribution policy to expedite development
- a members’ guide to enforcement and the regular review, with senior members, of major enforcement cases to monitor progress
- a document that describes how applications may be submitted and viewed online
- a high level of application permissions which reflects the council’s approach to encouraging development and its commitment of resources to ensure applications meet the required standard for approval
- strong performance management arrangements including quarterly reports, reviewed with the portfolio holder and chair of planning committee, and other performance reports to planning teams
- a report ‘Development Update’ produced every 6 months that sets out information on the Local Plan, large planning applications, infrastructure proposals, rural appeals etc.
- a strong design ethos that promotes quality development which will attract further quality development
- bringing forward a review of the current Local Plan.

The council’s overall strengths, and that of planning to support growth delivery, has seen it recently shortlisted for both the ‘Council of the Year’ and ‘Entrepreneurial Council of the Year’ categories in the Local Government Chronicle awards. The council’s planning service has and is performing at a very high level and has been a key element in delivering the council’s growth ambition.
2. **Key recommendations**

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some ‘quick wins’ and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team’s key recommendations to the council:

1. The council will need to set out its next programme of growth – following completion of the Big 8 – and how this meets the needs of Ashford’s residents and businesses.

2. Build on the planning service ‘end to end’ service model to ensure delivery of homes and development. This involves seeing the planning process extending beyond the determination of applications to the follow-up work with developers and house builders to deliver what has been approved. It will be important to ensure that the skills and resources are in place to deliver such an ‘end to end’ service.

3. Review the service’s availability and use of resources in light of increasing planning applications being received and increasing officer caseloads, including:
   
   A. Use the opportunity of the new planning IT system to review – in advance of implementation - business processes, practices and staff roles to gain service efficiencies and also reduce the use of paper. This could also consider the sufficiency of resources to deliver the current service.

   B. Develop opportunities to promote more flexible approaches to working within and across teams, including: improving team communications, use of secondments, opportunities for transferable learning etc.

   C. Develop the use of succession planning where officers may be considered to ‘step up’ to fill – initially on a temporary basis – senior positions that become vacant. This will provide service capacity, an opportunity to gain experience and support career development.

   D. Review the opportunities for shared service arrangements with neighbouring authorities. The advantages of such an approach can include: improved service resilience; increased capacity; and improved performance and cost savings.

4. Review arrangements for liaison with agents and developers so that these might be strengthened further.

5. Continue to work with members and the community on what planning can and cannot do so that expectations can be more realistically managed.

6. Review the operation of the planning committee so that the process of openly determining planning applications is more clearly understood by members, officers and members of the public.

**Summary of the peer challenge approach**

The peer team
Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) is a key partner and leader in delivering a programme of support to councils to drive forward improvement in plan making and development management. The planning peer challenge is part of this support, which also includes learning and improvement packages for officers and members of planning authorities.

The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Ashford Borough Council were:

- Karl Roberts – Director of Place, Arun District Council
- Councillor Andrew Proctor – Leader of Broadland District Council
- Alan Gomm – Planning Policy Manager, Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council
- Andrew Winfield – Peer Challenge Manager, LGA.

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Planning Peer Challenges. These are the areas we believe are critical to planning performance and improvement:

1. **Vision and leadership** – how the authority demonstrates high quality leadership to integrate spatial planning within corporate working to support delivery of corporate objectives
2. **Community leadership and engagement** – how the authority understands its community leadership role and community aspirations and how it uses spatial planning to deliver community aspirations
3. **Management and service delivery** - the effective use of skills and resources to achieve value for money, accounting for workload demands, ensuring capacity and managing the associated risks to deliver the authority’s spatial vision
4. **Partnership engagement and working** – how the authority has planned its work with partners to balance priorities and resources to deliver agreed priorities
5. **Achieving outcomes** – how the authority and other partners are delivering sustainable development outcomes for their area.

In addition to these questions, the council also asked the peer team to consider/review/provide feedback on:

- the enforcement function and its robustness, including the resources devoted to it
- the balance of resources across the planning service to meet the council’s ambitions and baseload work and whether this is deployed at the right levels
- members’ perception of officers’ effectiveness and professionalism
• the effectiveness and extent of joint working between policy and development management teams
• the extent to which there is effective joint working on planning issues between services in the council and with external partners to support delivery of corporate priorities
• how well the customer feels served by the planning service and to examine the breadth of this from large developers and to those making smaller applications
• how well the planning service is balancing pragmatism with attention to detail in enabling high quality development to come forward
• maintaining a 5 year housing land supply.

The above bullet points are addressed within the report under the principal five themes.

The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused and tailored to meet individual councils’ needs; they are not an inspection. The planning peer challenge helps planning authorities to review: what they are trying to achieve and what they are actually achieving; how they are going about it; and the areas to address to gain further improvement.

The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material they read.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 3 days onsite at Ashford, during which they spoke to more than 85 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholder. In addition they gathered information and views from more than 35 meetings, attending a planning committee meeting, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.

This report provides a summary of the peer team’s findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of the on-site visit on Friday 16 February. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things the council is already addressing and progressing.

3. Feedback

3.1 Vision and leadership

Ashford Borough Council (ABC) has a longstanding record of embracing change and growth. With the opening of the Channel Tunnel and the development of a high speed
rail link from London to mainland Europe via Ashford, the council recognised and accelerated the opportunity for growth to benefit the borough and its residents. The evidence of this is seen with the population annual growth rate of 1.5 per cent which is significantly higher than the Kent, South East and UK averages. Future growth of nearly 25 per cent is anticipated borough-wide from 2016 to 2031.

Political and managerial leadership is and has been at the forefront of delivering this ambition. The council’s Corporate Plan 2015-20 has as its number one priority ‘enterprising Ashford: economic investment and growth’.

The council recognises the importance of planning to deliver inward investment, development and housing. ABC’s ambition has been underpinned by being a plan-led authority with a local plan in place for more than 30 years to provide the framework for planned and sustainable growth. A revised Local Plan – covering 2011 to 2030 – is expected to be adopted in late 2018 that will demonstrate a 5 year housing land supply. The council’s organisational restructuring in 2017 created a directorate of Place and Space, incorporating the planning service, which emphasises the centrality of the spatial planning function to deliver on council ambitions.

Ambition is matched by delivery with partners seeing the council as a “can do authority – open for business”. Members and officers are working well together to deliver on growth. A key partner for one of the Big 8 told the peer team that from working with the council since 2013 they could see that the “Members get it” in terms of why growth is important and why it is important to work with partners on delivery. This outlook is also evidenced by the high rate of planning application permissions – significantly higher than regional and national averages – with this approach supported by members.

The senior officer team are working closely with members to deliver the political vision of growth and housing. Members are well engaged in the planning function. There is member involvement in local plan development, planning committee and the community representative role. The current administration established the Big 8 major development projects as a focal point in the council’s Corporate Plan. Impressive progress has been made on all 8 projects with a number of these delivered and the remainder imminent. This exemplifies the united political and managerial understanding and commitment to growth.

The council has enabled growth that without its intervention would not have happened. For example, the grant of £3m to the Ashford College was able to leverage £18m of partnership funding to ensure project completion and enrolment of students for September 2017. Another example is the council funding for town centre leisure development at Elwick Place, including a cinema, hotel and seven restaurant complex. Developers called the council’s lead on this a “game changer”.

The peer team found good member and officer relationships. This was evident from meetings conducted by the peer team and confirmed in a survey of planning committee and local plans task group members prior to the peer team work onsite.

However, there did appear to be some lack of clarity on the importance of planning’s role to deliver the corporate priorities of growth and housing and the team were told by officers that some “planners are less clear about their role”. This appeared to arise for a
number of related reasons, including: recent organisational changes that had left some planners unsure of where planning now sat in the corporate priorities; from the lack of join up between teams within planning and the overall sense of direction; and that the senior level focus on the Big 8 may have led some staff to be disconnected from the wider agenda. Ways to address this could include strengthening communications and reinforcing the central role of planning to not only express the council’s spatial vision but to also deliver on it.

The council and planning service acknowledge the value in taking time to reflect – with partners – to learn from the implementation of the Big 8 and taking account of what worked well and what could be improved. With local government only adopting a more commercial outlook in recent years, learning from experience will help to embed commercial skills and practices for future activity.

With this in mind it will be useful for the council and the planning service to identify the next round of growth priorities. This could involve the following considerations:

- to ensure that the new Local Plan – expected to be adopted in late 2018 – includes mechanisms to support delivery across the council and not only in planning
- the need to progress the production of economic development, housing and affordable housing strategies to support Local Plan delivery
- will the council want to take on another set of Big 8 projects or their equivalent? If so, what form might these should take given the priorities of the borough?
- in the future, how may the council influence the development of a higher value economy linked to the raising of skill levels?
- would the council wish to increase further its emphasis on quality development and the environment? If so, how could this be achieved?
- what might be the opportunities for developing further the rural economy through self-starting micro-businesses based around IT and knowledge economy enterprise?
- to continue to develop a narrative to set out the council’s ongoing ambition and vision of place to attract further inward investment.

3.2 Partnership working

Ashford has and will continue to attract investment funding and this places it in an advantageous position to shape growth. This is because the borough is located in an important strategic position for the Kent and South East economy by virtue of the high speed rail connection to London and mainland Europe. This is acknowledged by principal partner relationships, for example the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) and its £50m+ investment of growth funding towards the Big 8, with this unlocking another £115m. However, what is just as important is that partners recognise that the council will deliver on its ambition and this provides them with increased certainty and confidence in their investment.
Central to the council’s work to deliver growth has been the critical role of planning to enable delivery. The existence of a local plan for 30 years shows the council’s commitment to plan-led sustainable development that is shaped by a spatial vision.

Partners are very positive about working with ABC and describe it as a “very ambitious council” that is “unlocking delivery big time”. All the partners the peer team spoke with were very positive about the council’s ambition, its willingness to work with partners and its strong record of delivery. One key partner described the council as willing to “put money where its mouth is” and that it enjoyed an “open and honest relationship”.

Some developers did raise the issues of inconsistent advice where one officer might contradict another officer’s prior advice or where on occasion there could be over attention to detail rather than on more pragmatic solutions. This points to a working culture, described to the peer team, as ‘frontloading’ detail to cover all the planning issues so as to avoid being pulled up later in the process by a more senior officer. This appears to be a response to a process that can involve “multiple clicks, bells and whistles” that can add unnecessary detail and complication. This lends itself to be streamlined; involving delegating responsibility to more empower junior officers and recognising the difference between an ‘incorrect’ decision and a nuanced difference in interpretation.

The establishment of the Strategic Project Delivery Board has been crucial to bring senior partners around the table to discuss delivery of the Big 8 projects. This was a key factor in ensuring the delivery of the Big 8 as it held all partners accountable and allowed for development obstacles to be raised and solutions found. It is a good example of the council taking the partnership lead to establish and coordinate this forum.

There is a strong relationship between the council and Kent County Council (KCC). This operates politically from Leader to Leader and via the District Deal – the only one of its kind in Kent – which sets out ways in which the two councils will work together. The importance of this Deal is clear from a commitment that includes a Chilmington protocol to support the delivery of infrastructure, and the Ashford Town Centre Developers Group where KCC secured developer funding to enable delivery of a highways project that provides increased traffic capacity resulting from planned developments.

The peer team felt that the relationship with agents and developers, although generally good, could be strengthened. The council did have an agents’ forum but this had been discontinued until recently. The forum has now been reconvened and the peer team feel that it will be important to sustain this so that a rapport can be established. To ensure that this is a productive it is suggested that different formats be tried to arrive at something mutually beneficial. Likewise with developers it is important to develop relationships so that the council can gain an understanding of constraints developers may be working under and, from this, how the council might be able to assist. Such relationships can provide useful market intelligence.

3.3 Community and wider engagement
The council has an impressive record of constructive community engagement stretching over many years. Much of this engagement was of particular importance in developing local plans but it has also involved engagement with parish councils, resident groups, agents and developers on planning generally. This is important given the sensitivity of planning decisions and their impact on the borough.

The council performs well in attracting inward investment. Recent activity on this includes breakfast briefings with good attendance from developers, SELEP, volume housebuilders, the local MP and principal partners. A similar event was arranged in October 2017 at a venue in St Pancras, London. Alongside this is the ‘AshfordFor’ investment campaign where investors and business owners are used as storytellers of real success stories and for peer-to-peer marketing of key messages to target prospective new stakeholders.

Progress on neighbourhood plans has been mixed with seven being developed. However, the peer team did not detect from officers a high level of enthusiasm for neighbourhood plans, preferring in many circumstances more flexible and more tailored responses to local issues. This could be an area to explore as a means of extending community engagement and providing an opportunity to communities to express their views on development, growth and place shaping in their own way, possibly outside the local plan ambit, perhaps as community or place plans.

Although the council has a great strength in consultation and engagement, communities can feel frustrated that they are often not provided with feedback on the reasons for decisions made on matters they had been earlier consulted on. This failure to close the feedback loop could lead people to feel that, although consulted, their voices had not been heard. It would be beneficial to bear this in mind for future activity.

There can be a misconception of what planning is able to do and misunderstandings that can lead to unrealistic expectations. For this reason, and given the sensitivity of planning decisions in the borough, it will be important for the council to continue to work with members and the community on what planning can and cannot do.

3.4 Management and service delivery

3.4.1 Balance of resources

Planning has very capable and professional staff. This is evidenced by good planning performance figures, the high level of permissions, the investment of resources into supporting quality application outcomes, maintaining local plan coverage for the borough and by the peer team meeting staff during our work onsite.

ABC recognises the importance of the planning service. There has recently been an increase in staff resources and the planning reserve; the latter to finance additional cover arrangements and decision appeals. Design has been given priority to deliver quality development through the use of design workshops, a Design Awards scheme and an Ashford Design Review Panel. This contributes towards high quality public realm and quality built development, which not only improves the environment but helps attract future investment.
The service has also devised an innovative means of ‘growing its own planners’ through a scheme that supports non-planning graduates to gain a master’s degree in planning and urban design. This mechanism goes some way to address the difficulty of recruiting planning staff in what can be a fierce competition with other Kent councils.

There is an opportunity to review service working processes with a new IT system that is proposed. A review of the current IT system (Accolade) is underway. The new system will provide an opportunity – in advance of implementation – to review the overall planning system of business processes, practices and staff roles to gain efficiencies and, at the same time, reduce the use of paper.

There is an issue regarding resource utilisation. Staff are juggling lots of balls, a lot of demands are being made of planning – not least the resource demand to ensure the Big 8 projects stay on track, the demands made of urban design expertise to meet the council’s emphasis on design quality – with some officers managing what appeared to be high caseloads, and an increase in planning applications by 33 per cent over the last five years. The council acknowledges that this is placing a strain on the planning service and the peer team suggest that this should be an area for review.

In reviewing the resources of the planning service it will be important to try to anticipate future need and consider how to build capacity. Significant growth is planned for the future so it would be expected that this will make demands on the planning service. In this regard the council may take account of how it will invest the increased planning fee income.

The peer team believe that it will be important to review practices and procedures to ensure these are being deployed to provide optimum efficiency. The team found evidence of ‘silos’ working with planning teams not communicating with each other, nor were teams always working effectively with teams in other services. This was resulting in, for example, planning policy not having communication with development management colleagues to discuss proposed policy and the practicalities of policy implementation. There was also not enough communication between the strategic sites team with development management colleagues, where it would be expected that beneficial cross references would be available for shared learning. The peer team believe that reviewing working practices and procedures, with increased use of shared learning events and joint team briefings, would likely release additional capacity.

The peer team also believe that there would be value in developing ‘succession planning’ as a means to fill personnel gaps and provide service capacity. The service has experienced a number of senior service gaps that have been filled by the use of consultants. This seems counter-intuitive when the council is growing its own planners, with its graduate programme, but does not use this same resource, where appropriate, to step up to cover some of these vacancies.

Finally, in considering capacity and looking at optimum use of resources it is worth considering the opportunities for collaboration with other councils. This is particularly so for those specialist areas that the council acknowledges can be difficult to recruit to such as enforcement and heritage. Shared service arrangements could include, for example, collaboration in commissioning local plan evidence, specialist services for example around historic buildings and conservation and evaluating what services the
council may be best placed to offer other councils. The advantages of such an approach can include improved service resilience, more capacity and improved performance and cost savings.

### 3.4.2 Confidence in decision making/performance

As stated above the council is fortunate to have a capable and professional set of planning staff. They embody the council’s ‘can do’ attitude shown by the high level of permissions and high level of delegated decisions. It is also shown by the council’s willingness to invest time in pursuing good development and design outcomes and its preparedness to negotiate hard for these when necessary. The latter is shown by the council’s decision to go for larger space standards for internal and garden spaces at Chilmington. These standards mean that overall housing numbers are slightly reduced but is more than compensated by family homes that offer more space for families and their future expansion.

Planning performance is good by standard measures and there is a high level of permissions. There is an investment made by the service into getting applications to be approved and this is supported by its pre-application service.

The peer team attended a planning committee meeting and found some areas that would benefit from review. The layout of committee reports was not always consistent and the work of the committee could be improved by:

- opening the meeting with introductions from members and staff
- having council officers making a brief verbal summary of each report and application
- explaining the purpose of speakers to an application and the time allowed
- advising speakers in advance on their use of the microphone (at the meeting a number of speakers were unable to be heard)
- reminding members of the procedure for proposing and voting on motions
- providing a summary of each decision so that this is understood by the public present.

From interviews with planning customers it appeared that planning advice could be countermanded at a later stage by a more senior member of staff. The peer team felt that nuanced interpretations would always be possible on planning matters but that staff should be encouraged to have the confidence to provide the customer with an opinion as early as possible. Once a decision has been made, at whatever level, then actions should follow to ensure that this is followed through. Although it may not have been a decision another person would have made it should still be held as being a reasonable conclusion.

### 3.4.3 Communication

It is clear that development partners know that Ashford is ‘open for business’ and, from what they told the peer team, they value the accessibility of staff. Developers and
agents spoke positively of their relationship with staff. The service has recently re-established the agents’ forum and this should further improve working relations.

The council’s use of Development Briefing is a powerful means for discussing future plans and gaining consensus. Open to all members it introduces emerging schemes to members and can involve presentations by developers. It meets in private when schemes are at pre-application stage but becomes a public forum when a scheme is subject to a live application. The peer team attended a briefing while onsite and this involved setting out future proposals, including public consultation for an Ashford town centre framework, a residents’ survey and a town centre stakeholder conference in June 2018.

As stated above the peer team saw evidence of parts of planning working in ‘silos’. This will affect efficiency and effectiveness and if left unaddressed could impact on staff retention. The peer team did not have sufficient time onsite to fully understand all the reasons why this might have occurred but accept that, with the council’s focus on the Big 8, attention may have been deflected away from some operational areas. The peer team feel that the following could assist in addressing this:

- review communications internally to improve practices and processes
- provide opportunities for colleagues to work in different teams to gain and share experience
- promote flexible working practices so that resources can shift during peaks and troughs
- create a Development Team approach that is supported by communications across teams
- ensure early engagement with other departments to gain best outcomes e.g. drafting s.106s
- evaluate the potential for developing more internal protocols.

3.4.4 Enforcement

Enforcement has a high political profile. It is an emotive subject for residents and parish councils and this is mirrored by elected members. It is also a corporate priority with it being referenced in the council’s Corporate Plan.

The council has reviewed its enforcement practice and increased the resources it puts to this. The council monitors high level enforcement cases through quarterly reviews with the portfolio holder and the chair of the Enforcement Board.

The new emphasis on enforcement has achieved a number of successes. There is a significant use of high court injunctions with 10 issued for the first three quarters of 2017-18. The council has developed an out of hours pack to set out the process to be followed by staff in the event of an incident. The peer team felt that this was very good practice. This has brought increased media coverage of council actions and successes. In turn this contributes to raising public understanding on enforcement matters and shows how proactive the council is in this area as well as serving as a deterrent to would-be offenders.
Despite this, public understanding of what is enforceable is not well understood and this can apply to some members. This can lead to unrealistic expectations of what the council is able to do. To this end it will be important for the council to continue to work to ensure everyone understands what enforcement can/can’t do to better manage expectations around the use of specific tools.

Finally, it is always important to consider when the causes of enforcement can be avoided. For example, the assessment of need for Gypsy and Traveller sites, followed by site identification and development, would make enforcement in this area clearer.

3.5 Achieving outcomes

The Big 8 are approaching completion and have attracted significant investment. These will be important to develop Ashford as an area for inward investment. Planning’s role in this has been central and will be equally important for the next phase of growth, not least in delivering the emerging Local Plan to frame growth to 2030.

In the longer-term it may be worth considering entering a strategic planning arrangement with neighbouring councils. There is already in place an East Kent Duty to Co-operate memorandum of understanding (December 2017) that includes Canterbury, Dover, Thanet, Shepway and Ashford. This group could provide the basis for an East Kent strategic plan – underneath which would be contained individual authority local plans – with the advantage that the larger group would be in a stronger position to lobby for resources from Government, the LEP and other sources. Government appears to also favour strategic planning arrangements with the expectation that a revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) will incorporate a ‘duty to agree’ that will focus on strategic issues including housing provision and distribution, and strategic infrastructure requirements.

Ashford College – one of the Big 8 projects – is an important platform for future social outcomes. The council recognises that skills development is a key issue for its economy and this was behind its decision to provide grant support to the college’s development. It is also important for residents and their access to education. Prior to the college’s opening 450 students had to travel to Canterbury for their studies; this has now been reduced to 100. It is also important in offering students degree level courses that are validated by the University of Kent.

The Chilmington Green urban extension is also one of the Big 8 projects and proposed to create 5,750 homes and 1,000 jobs over a 25 year period. A design code supplementary planning document (SPD) has been approved and a Quality Agreement negotiated with developers at the outset.

Planning is open to new building techniques and has approved new modular construction for a large private rented scheme (PRS) scheme. The advantages of this include speed of construction and the scale of the development – 170 units – shows the confidence of investors to invest in PRS schemes. This could contribute towards affordable housing need and might be a model to be developed for the future.
The planning service produces an annual report to council on sums received and decisions on allocation that the peer team felt represented good practice. Section 106 (s.106) monies deliver an average annual figure of £3.5m and this is an important resource to deliver local priorities as informed by the local plan.

The council is losing ground on affordable housing delivery. The strategic housing market needs assessment (SHMA) calculates that 368 affordable homes are required each year but this level of build has never been achieved over the last 10 years. The council will need to develop an affordable housing strategy and consider how the council, registered providers, institutional and other partners could do more to improve on delivery. At the same time the council could consider building on its own impressive record of affordable housing delivery through the HRA and the potential to address this through its recently established housing development company.

Housing delivery is important to maintain the Local Plan trajectory and also to meet local need. Consideration should be given to developing a housing delivery plan to assist in maintaining focus. It may be worth considering new ways of encouraging this. For example planning application conditions could reduce the reserved matters time from 3 years to 18 months and start time 12 months thereafter. More small sites could be identified to support housing delivery. The council could step up its own housebuilding programme.

It is clear that the planning service is undergoing a shift of emphasis to become an ‘end to end’ service to ensure delivery of homes and development. This approach sees the planning process as extending beyond the determination of applications to the follow-up work with developers and house builders to deliver what has been approved. The Government is increasingly promoting this approach in relation to housing and it is recommended that the council ensure that the skills and resources are in place to continue this more proactive and positive style of working.

Recognition of Ashford’s strategic importance for the Kent and South East economy will continue to attract investment. Knowing this it will be vital that the council and the planning service consider what the focus for future phases of growth should be to best meet the needs of residents, businesses and Ashford’s economy.

4. Next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The LGA and PAS are well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Kate Herbert, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Kate’s contact details are: email kate.herbert@local.gov.uk and telephone 07867 632404.