

## Cabinet

Minutes of a Meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber, International House, Dover Place, Ashford on the **11<sup>th</sup> June 2026**.

### **Present:**

Cllr. Ovenden (Chair);

Cllr. Campkin (Vice-Chair);

Cllrs. Betty, Giles, Harman, Hayward, Nilsson, Pullen.

### **Apologies:**

None.

### **Also Present:**

Cllrs. Bartlett, Chilton, Feacey, Gathern, C Suddards.

### **In attendance:**

Chief Executive; Deputy Chief Executive; Corporate Director of Housing, Customer, Technology and Finance; Corporate Director of Health and Wellbeing; Assistant Director of Finance; Assistant Director of Housing; Assistant Director of Environment, Property and Recreation; Assistant Director of People, Communications and Technology; Head of Policy and Performance; Principal Solicitor (Strategic Development) and Deputy Monitoring Officer; Human Resources Manager; Service Lead for Performance, Improvement and Engagement; Housing Complaints and Resolutions Manager; Housing Strategy and Partnerships Manager; Housing Options Manager; Estates Manager; Customer Service Manager; Spatial Planning Manager; Safety and Wellbeing Manager; Corporate Policy Officer; Communications Officer; Democratic Services Manager.

## 41 Minutes

### **Resolved:**

**That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 14<sup>th</sup> May 2026 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.**

## 42 Leader's Announcements

The Leader wanted to mention the latest water issues which had seen a great deal of Ashford experiencing intermittent or no water at periods recently. Ashford's MP, Sojan Joseph had secured a debate at Westminster Hall the previous day which the

Leader had attended. It had been an interesting and comprehensive debate, including some of the Kent MPs, including Katie Lam. The Water Minister had made some supportive comments about the issues being faced in Kent with regard to supply. The issue of waste water had also been raised and the Minister said they were in total support of getting this sorted out and were aware of the awful service being provided by both South East and Southern Water in this area. They were examining the way these companies were regulated because they needed to be held to account by the Regulator in the right amount. The Leader thought it was worth Members looking up the meeting on Hansard and listening to the debate and the questions raised because they were very relevant. Finally, the Leader wanted to put on record thanks to Sojan for securing that debate and representing Ashford.

### **43 Corporate Complaints 2025/26**

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report - a document that proved Ashford's residents were nothing if not enthusiastic communicators. Between April 2025 and March 2026, they had received 1,244 complaints, a 27% rise on last year, showing that people were increasingly confident in telling the Council exactly what they thought. Most of the complaints were resolved quickly (80.5% at Stage One), and while Housing once again had the highest number of complaints, this reflected the scale and complexity of the service rather than any particular crisis. A relatively new phenomenon this year had been AI-generated complaints, which were often overly long, complicated and factually incorrect, but still needed to be dealt with. Despite rising volumes, the Council's response times had significantly improved, with 83% answered within target. Teams across the Council were learning from feedback, strengthening processes and making real improvements for residents. So, in considering this report, the Portfolio Holder thought it was important to remember that complaints were not a sign of failure, they were a sign of engagement and teams' commitment to listening and improving was something they should be proud of.

In response to a question from a Member, the Customer Service Manager said they could provide some comparative data with other Local Authorities in future reports.

#### **Resolved:**

- That**
- (i) the Corporate Complaints 2025/26 report be received, noted and approved for publication on the Council's website.**
  - (ii) the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman Self-Assessment be approved for publication.**
  - (iii) the performance measures highlighted in the report be noted.**
  - (iv) the amendments to the Complaints Handling Policy in response to growing volumes of lengthy AI generated complaints, be agreed.**

## **44 Annual Complaint Handling Performance Report (Housing)**

The Portfolio Holder for Performance introduced the report and advised that this past year had seen significant pressure on the Housing Service, with 819 complaints received, including exceptionally high volumes over the winter months driven by heating, hot water and damp and mould issues. As the report noted, this reflected both national trends and the increased accessibility of the complaints process. Despite these challenges, there had been real improvement. Stage 1 response times had risen sharply, particularly in Repairs, where performance had increased from 52% to 72% within timescale. Stage 2 responses had also strengthened. The Cabinet wanted to recognise the hard work of Officers who had delivered those gains in a year of rising demand.

The report also set out the steps that were being taken to go further including: - a new dedicated Housing Complaints Team; stronger oversight; improved compensation practices; and the introduction of the “Customer Promise” function to ensure commitments made to residents were delivered. This was a service that was learning, adapting and committed to doing better for residents. The Portfolio Holder particularly wanted to thank the Service Lead for Performance, Improvement and Engagement for doing the hard work in the background.

A Member said they had been concerned about references to ‘maladministration’ and ‘severe maladministration’ in some of the Housing Ombudsman complaints and whilst the way these complaints were handled was important, the most important issue was fixing the issues being complained about, particularly with regard to damp and mould. Reassurance was sought that the team had the resources and wherewithal to deal with these issues and relationships with contractors were strong. The Corporate Director of Housing, Customer, Technology and Finance confirmed that they were working very hard on damp and mould. With Awaab’s Law now in place they had a duty to respond within a certain timescale and they were doing this. There had been issues with contractors but they were meeting regularly and working with them to ensure similar issues did not reoccur next winter. They did have a lot of data on this and this could be shared with the Member. ‘Maladministration’ was a term frequently used by the Ombudsman and in cases referred to them in 2024/25, 73% had had maladministration issues within them. The Chief Executive advised that the Asset and Compliance Board met regularly to look at all issues related to compliance and had a strong oversight of the data and performance and ensuring that timescales were being met. They had also been working with the Housing Regulator over the last two years and now had really good systems in place. There was a possibility of an inspection from the Housing Regulator later in the year and this would be a good opportunity to demonstrate all of this.

### **Resolved:**

**That (i) the Housing Complaints Performance Report be received, noted and approved for publication.**

- (ii) **the performance improvement actions in the report be noted and supported.**
- (iii) **the self-assessment form be noted and approved for publication and submission.**

## **45 Annual Commercial Property Update 2025/26**

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which updated on the annual progress of the Council's non-residential portfolio and the work that the Council was undertaking to secure and increase the revenue it received from its commercial assets. The report provided a market update and detailed the revenue performance during the financial year 2025/26, providing a summary of how the Council's main commercial assets were performing. Some of the main headlines included contracted rent at circa. £3.53m, a rent collection rate of 94.8% and commercial asset occupancy of useable floor space at 82.4%.

### **Resolved:**

- That**
- (i) **the performance of the Council's corporate property portfolio during the financial year 2025/26 be noted.**
  - (ii) **external factors affecting the commercial market conditions be noted.**

## **46 Corporate Property Asset Management Strategy**

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which sought Cabinet approval for the Corporate Property Asset Management Strategy covering the period 2026–2030. The Strategy provided a clear and structured framework for the effective management of the Council's non-housing property portfolio, recognising the diverse role that these assets played in supporting service delivery, community objectives, placemaking and regeneration, while also generating income to support the Council's financial position.

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Development said they wanted to congratulate the Officer team and the Portfolio Holder for bringing this Strategy forward and knew it was something they had long wanted to do.

In response to a question about vacant units at Carlton Road and potential future use given that 'light industrial' was a rather broad-brush term, the Estates Manager advised that they were monitoring and managing these units and they did have a policy on the type of occupier and appropriate usage that would be permitted. Whilst market conditions were currently quite difficult, there were some interested parties and they were not unduly worried at the moment.

### **Resolved:**

- That**
- (i) **the Corporate Property Asset Management Strategy 2026-2030 be approved**

- (ii) **the Assistant Director of Environment, Property and Recreation be authorised to agree minor amendments to the Strategy.**

## **47 Domestic Abuse Policy (External Policy)**

The Housing Options Manager introduced the report which provided a summary of the Council's external Domestic Abuse Policy for the residents of the Ashford Borough, outlining the Council's commitments, responsibilities and measures in place to protect and support those affected. It was advised that there would be a separate Domestic Abuse Policy, specifically for Ashford Borough Council staff affected by domestic abuse, which would be presented at the July Cabinet following consultation at the Joint Consultative Committee.

A Member said they very much supported the excellent work that was going on but questioned whether, given the scale of the problem locally, the drop-in centre at the Willow Centre should open longer than for four hours, once a week. They also asked about the situation where families fleeing domestic abuse who had relocated outside the Borough, had not been prioritised for school places in their new locations, meaning that they may have to return to Ashford for school, placing the family in danger at drop off and pick up times. Was there anything that could be done in conjunction with KCC to address this? The Housing Options Manager said that as part of the Domestic Abuse Act, children were now recognised as 'survivors' of Domestic Abuse so they were considered. Working with KCC, there was a Domestic Abuse Tactical Group and a Local Partnership Board, both of which Officers sat on, so the work cascaded down and was implemented within the Borough. They worked closely together and if children were affected in this way, KCC would often pay for travel to school. In terms of the opening hours of the Willow Centre, the Leader said that clearly, they would like it to be open for longer, but ultimately this was a question of resources. The Housing Options Manager advised that Clarion held the contract in Ashford for the domestic abuse service and they worked closely with them. They had also opened a drop-in café that operated from The Wardrobe in North Street and there was a drop in there once a week as well as the therapy groups that ran on a 12-week course, so the links with Clarion were providing other services that could be signposted to.

A Member said that sadly, it was a recognised phenomenon that incidents of Domestic Abuse rose during big football tournaments such as the World Cup which was just about to start. Was anything planned to combat this? The Housing Options Manager advised that a #KnowSeeSpeakOut End Domestic Abuse campaign had been launched and the Council were actively supporting that. This would be on the Council's channels, particularly when England were playing, and they would try to highlight positive change.

### **Resolved:**

- That (i) the external Domestic Abuse Policy be endorsed.**
- (ii) authority be delegated to the Assistant Director of Housing to make any subsequent changes arising from legislative or operational changes.**

## 48 Equalities Policy

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which presented the Council's updated Equalities Policy for 2026–2028. This strengthened the Council's commitment to fairness, dignity and inclusion across everything it did. As the report highlighted, Ashford was a growing and increasingly diverse Borough and this policy ensured Council services remained accessible, responsive and aligned with their duties under the Equality Act. It set out clear equality objectives, a stronger focus on accessibility and a modern understanding of intersectionality - all essential as communities continued to change. However, policies only worked when they were followed by Councillors, so they made a clear request to Members to please attend the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training on 1 July 2026. If they expected their organisation to embed equality into its decisions, they must lead from the front. The policy gave them the framework and the training would give them the confidence. Together, these would help them to build a Borough where everyone felt they belonged.

### **Resolved:**

- That**
- (i) the draft policy be approved for public consultation.**
  - (ii) authority be delegated to the Head of Policy and Performance to make minor amendments to the Policy arising from responses to the consultation.**

## 49 Parking Strategy

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which presented the final Parking Strategy for Ashford Borough 2026–2030 for approval and adoption, following a comprehensive programme of public consultation. Cabinet approved the draft Parking Strategy for consultation on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2026. The consultation took place between 19<sup>th</sup> January and 16<sup>th</sup> February 2026, attracting 121 responses alongside a detailed submission from the Central Ashford Community Forum. All feedback had been carefully reviewed and had directly informed refinements to the strategy, ensuring it reflected the key themes, priorities and concerns raised by residents, businesses and stakeholders. The amendments made were minor in nature and focused primarily on strengthening references to the differing characteristics and parking needs of the Borough's two towns. The Parking Strategy provided a clear, high-level policy framework for the management and future direction of parking across the Borough over the next four years. It established strategic priorities and guiding principles, rather than setting out operational detail and it did not introduce any specific projects or site-based decisions. Any future proposals would be developed separately and progressed through the appropriate governance, consultation and decision-making processes.

The Portfolio Holder stressed the role of the cross-party Working Group in developing the strategy and working with Tenterden Town Council. Whilst they would all like to reduce car usage, it was important to be realistic. This strategy supported active travel and integration with public transport, recognising the role parking played in supporting more sustainable journeys. Targeted infrastructure improvements and behavioural

change initiatives would encourage walking, cycling and public transport use, alongside motorcycles and car travel.

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Development highlighted the references to the Local Plan 2042 and Regulation 18 and the changes to the process that were referred to in the next Agenda report which meant that these references were now out of date. They asked if new wording could be agreed with Planning that reflected the current position, before this was published. This was agreed and accommodated within recommendation (ii). The Parking team were invited to attend a future meeting of the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group.

A Member welcomed the Strategy and considered parking could be a very powerful tool to drive change in attitudes and behaviours. Thinking strategically about the way they charged for parking could bring real change and they pointed to the example of free parking for four hours for members at the Stour Centre, which drove membership and obviously improved health and wellbeing, as well as encouraging people to perhaps spend money in the town afterwards if they felt less rushed. It was hoped something similar could be introduced for users of the Victoria Park Park Run which regularly attracted between 300 and 500 visitors every Saturday. There was an impact from parking in nearby residential streets, but if users were able to park for free for an hour or two in Victoria Road Car Park for example, this would not only drive participation in a very important health and wellbeing event, it would also reduce the pressure on nearby residential streets and encourage people to visit the town centre and drive footfall there. It was a request that had been made before, but the Member wanted to place it on record as they thought it was a really good idea. The Leader said that all ideas were welcome and would be considered, but this was, at this stage, a high-level Strategy and they did need to be conscious of resources.

Another Member said there was concern that the Strategy didn't make a strong enough commitment to residents of the Town Centre. They needed innovative and low-cost solutions and there was a growing concern about being able to find appropriate parking with a rapidly growing population. The Leader said it was about striking a balance, as whilst they didn't want to encourage car use within the Town Centre, they had to be realistic and proportionate. This was a high-level Strategy and more detailed aspirations would be considered as they moved forward. The Safety and Wellbeing Manager advised that the residents' permit scheme had not been reviewed for a considerable time and this was likely to be one of the projects that would come out of this Strategy and look at how they could support the residents within the Town Centre.

**Resolved:**

- That (i) the Ashford Parking Strategy 2026-2030 be approved and adopted.**
- (ii) authority be delegated to the Director of Health and Wellbeing, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder and the Planning team, to make minor amendments to the Strategy, including updating the references to the Local Plan and its processes.**

## **50 New Local Planning System – Notice of Intention to Commence Local Plan Preparation and Local Plan Timetable**

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which provided a summary of the new planning system introduced as part of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 insofar as it related to plan making. The report explained the next steps for preparing the Ashford Local Plan and sought approval to publish a Notice of Intention to Commence Local Plan Preparation and a Local Plan Timetable by 30th June 2026. It also sought delegated authority to carry out all detailed steps required as part of the new Local Plan preparation process, subject to the well-established processes of Cabinet approval of the contents of a draft Local Plan and Full Council's decisions to submit it for Examination and adopt it.

The Leader asked about the financial implications section of the report which stated that failure to publish a Notice of Intention to Commence Local Plan Preparation and Local Plan timetable by the end of June 2026, may result in the Council having to return MHCLG funding of £108,475.57. The Spatial Planning Manager confirmed that this was a possibility. The funding had been awarded to encourage Local Planning Authorities to move swiftly into the new planning system.

### **Resolved:**

- That**
- (i) it be agreed that a Notice of Intention to Commence Local Plan Preparation be published on the Council's website by the end of June 2026, and authority be delegated to the Assistant Director of Planning and Development, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning, Housing Delivery and Communication, to prepare and publish it.**
  - (ii) the Local Plan Timetable attached at Appendix 2 to this report be agreed, and authority be delegated to the Assistant Director of Planning and Development, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning, Housing Delivery and Communication, to publish it on the Council's website by the end of June 2026, including any minor changes to it that may be necessary or desirable.**
  - (iii) authority be delegated to the Assistant Director of Planning and Development and/or the Spatial Planning Manager, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning, Housing Delivery and Communication, to take all necessary or desirable steps in or ancillary to the updating of a Local Plan Timetable and the preparation of a new Local Plan, including all steps required by the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2026 and related Guidance and any other relevant statutes, regulations, guidance and rules of law, other than:-**

**(a) approval of the contents of a draft Local Plan for each stage of public consultation, which shall be given by the Cabinet (or otherwise in accordance with the Executive Leader's directions), and**

**(b) decisions to submit a draft Local Plan for Examination and to adopt a Local Plan, which shall be made by Full Council.**

## **51 Shared Ownership Policy**

The Housing Strategy and Partnerships Manager introduced the report which presented the Shared Ownership Policy, clearly setting out how the Council sold and managed its shared ownership homes. Shared Ownership was a form of affordable home ownership that allowed eligible households to buy a share of a home and pay rent on the remaining share, with the option to buy further shares over time through staircasing. This could lead to full ownership of the home in some cases (there were restrictions in some areas). The policy covered the Council's approach to marketing, applications, assessments, sales, charges (rent and service charges), maintenance and resales of shared ownership homes. It also covered data monitoring, where shared ownership properties were owned by Registered Providers. Shared Ownership was one of a number of tenures the Council had available and could offer an easier way to exit the private sector rental market if eligible.

The Leader said that, as Portfolio Holder, they very much supported the policy and looked forward to it being implemented.

### **Resolved:**

**That (i) the Shared Ownership Policy be approved.**

**(ii) authority be delegated to the Assistant Director of Housing to make any subsequent changes arising from legislative or operational changes.**

## **52 Hybrid Working Policy**

The Human Resources Manager introduced the report which advised that the Council's Remote Working Policy for employees had been in place since the Covid pandemic and, following advice from the Council's audit partners, now required review and refinement to ensure that it reflected current organisational needs. They clarified that around 40% of employees could only carry out their work tasks at a site.

The Portfolio Holder thanked everyone who had worked so hard to produce this policy and those who had contributed to discussions at meetings along the way.

The item was opened up to Members and the following points were raised: -

- A flexible but clear hybrid working policy was needed in the modern workplace to assist with recruitment and retention. It was something that was now expected by

employees and applicants and it was important to have a mixture of in person and remote working options.

- It was anticipated that new starters would initially attend the office more frequently than the two-day standard as they settled in to their roles and it would be important for new starters to be flexible with working hours and locations during their induction period. Ultimately there would be discretion for Managers to decide what was required in their service areas.

**Resolved:**

**That the revised policy be approved within the Council's Conditions of Service.**

## **53 Trading and Enterprise Board – Minutes of 26<sup>th</sup> May 2026**

**Resolved:**

**That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Trading and Enterprise Board held on the 26<sup>th</sup> May 2026 be received and noted.**

## **54 Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group – Notes of 29<sup>th</sup> April 2026**

**Resolved:**

**That the Notes of the Meeting of the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group held on the 29<sup>th</sup> April 2026 be received and noted.**

## **55 Schedule of Key Decisions to be Taken**

**Resolved:**

**That the latest Schedule of Key Decisions as set out within the report be received and noted.**

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