



people
serving
people

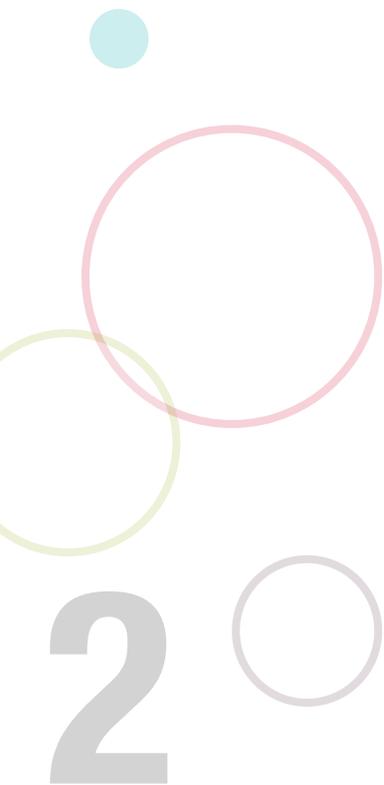


ASHFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

Annual Report
2017 - 2018

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GERRY CLARKSON, CBE

LEADER, ASHFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

The latest Ashford Borough Council annual report comes as a number of the 'Big 8' projects for the borough approach completion – from the construction of a flagship town centre leisure development at Elwick Place to the start of works to extend the Ashford Designer Outlet, 2018 is truly the year of delivery for Ashford.

While we move forward it is important that we do not lose perspective of where we have come from, and a number of events to celebrate the history, heritage and culture of the borough have taken place in the last year, with more planned in the year to come which you can read about in this report and in Ashford For You – our brand new quarterly residents' magazine.

Our commitment to delivering quality local services and making sure Ashford is a borough

where people want to live and businesses want to locate is being recognised nationally, with the council shortlisted for two categories in the prestigious Local Government Chronicle awards recognising our work in 'the Ashford way'.

Alongside exciting developments in the town centre and new opportunities for all our residents, the last year has also seen the number of empty shops in the town centre continue to fall, recycling rates continue to rise and council tax kept at the lowest level in Kent.

I look forward to sharing news of Ashford's continued progress with you all in future editions of Ashford For You and next year's annual report.



TRACEY KERLY

CHIEF EXECUTIVE, ASHFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

As a forward-thinking, entrepreneurial council we are always looking to ensure that our services are effective and deliver the best value for residents while retaining the lowest level of council tax in Kent.

To ensure that we are at the forefront of best practice in local government, we invited representatives of the Local Government Association in to the council to conduct reviews of our Planning and Development service and our corporate governance arrangements, both of which have shown that Ashford continues to lead the way with its innovative approach while safeguarding services and keeping costs low.

Earlier this year we conducted a wide-reaching residents' survey, seeking your views on the council's performance and areas where we can look to better serve the people of the borough in future. Thank you to everyone who completed one of these surveys, and we look forward to sharing the results of these on our website shortly.

This annual report shows only a small amount of the council's good work over the last year as we work to deliver our corporate plan priorities – please check out our website, social media and our new residents' magazine for more on our work.

The Five Year Corporate Plan – for Aspiration, Action and Achievement

Ashford Borough Council's Corporate Plan for 2015-2020 sets the context and direction for the council up to the end of the decade. The Corporate Plan is ordered around five priorities designed to focus our efforts to deliver the vision of Ashford as an aspirational, active and achieving borough.

PRIORITY 1

ENTERPRISING ASHFORD: ECONOMIC INVESTMENT and GROWTH

Our Aspiration:

To promote growth and achieve greater economic prosperity for Ashford borough. We will work to secure inward investment to create a wide range of jobs carried out by a highly skilled workforce.



Enterprising Ashford

Enterprising Ashford

Vacancy rates in Ashford town centre have remained at low levels through much of the last year, dropping to 8% in November 2017. The council's ownership of Park Mall has also reduced vacancy rates in this key town centre location, which have fallen to 6% over the last year.

The council's decision to intervene where the private sector had failed through purchasing Park Mall in June 2015 has turned the centre's fortunes around – footfall has increased year on year with over 2.3 million people visiting Park Mall in 2017, showing increased confidence in the town centre. Made in Ashford, a collective shop in Park Mall celebrated its second birthday in October 2017 and continues to offer local producers an opportunity to test out selling on the high street.

There is £668m of recent and current investment in the borough that has been stimulated through a combined approach of focused project delivery and strategic marketing and promotion of Ashford as an area to invest in through the council's successful AshfordFor campaign. The council has also continued to invest in the borough to deliver further business development opportunities, including the purchase of 28 light industrial units at Carlton Road.

The borough's economy continues to grow – median weekly earnings for Ashford residents rose to £577.50 in 2017, higher than the national average (of £552.70) and the Kent average (of £574.90), whilst unemployment in the borough has remained below the national and Kent averages for the last year.

The Ashford and Tenterden Tourism Association continued to grow in 2017 with 54 active members working closely with the council to support business development and promote the visitor offer around the borough.



2018 – The year of delivery

2018 – THE YEAR OF DELIVERY

2018 represents a milestone in the council's delivery programme, with significant construction around the town both underway and due for completion before the end of the year. Several of the council's Big 8 projects, which are critical to the future economic growth and prosperity of the area, are all progressing through Ashford Borough Council's intervention, impetus and innovation.



Ashford College ▼

The new £26m Ashford College campus on Elwick Road opened in September 2017. It was brought forward sooner through £3m of council grant funding and it now welcomes around 1,000 students per day, equipping them with the employment skills needed in Ashford in the future. Further phases will see an even wider range of facilities added.

Elwick Place ▲

Funded by the council, the flagship town-centre leisure development at Elwick Place includes a six-screen Picturehouse cinema, a 58-bedroom Travelodge hotel and restaurant complex. The project is due to open before Christmas 2018.



Designer Outlet ▼

McArthurGlen has begun work to add around 50 new stores and restaurants to the Ashford Designer Outlet. The project will add around 100,000 sq. ft., to the centre, which already attracts more than 3.6m visitors a year.

Commercial Quarter ▲

Construction of the Commercial Quarter will establish an important business hub for the south east next to Ashford International Station. The first phase comprises a new 80,000sq ft. office block, the first constructed in Ashford for decades, and is due for completion in summer 2018.



2018 – The year of delivery



Chilmington Green ▲

The first phase of development has also begun at Chilmington Green, which will see 5,750 homes come forward over the next 25 years. The brand new community will eventually be home to around 12,000 people. Developers will provide £125m towards local amenities, including a secondary school and four primary schools, shops, healthcare, sports and leisure facilities, and road improvements.



Junction 10a ▲

Work on a new £104m motorway junction at J10a of the M20 started in spring 2018. The long-awaited junction, being constructed 700 metres east of the existing J10, will be the catalyst for further economic and commercial development, providing much-needed extra capacity in the town.

Ashford International Signalling ▼

A £10m signalling upgrade at Ashford International Station was completed in Spring 2018, ensuring that Ashford can receive the next generation of Eurostar trains. The project, which has included modifications to platforms to handle the wider fleet of European trains, is vital to secure Ashford's continuing status as an international town.



Jasmin Vardimon ▼

The Council has been working closely with Kent County Council to bring forward the planning application (expected this summer) that will help deliver a creative hub in Ashford for the Jasmin Vardimon Company. This Arts Council England funded organisation, currently located in the Stour Centre tours nationally and internationally, performing at high profile venues across Europe, Asia and the US. The project will enable schools and local audiences to share in the inspiring work of the company and other artists.



PRIORITY 2

LIVING ASHFORD: QUALITY HOUSING AND HOMES FOR ALL

Our Aspiration:

To secure quality homes across the borough, catering for a range of ages, tenures and need, in well planned and attractive new places.

Living Ashford

The delivery of new homes to meet the needs of all residents is of paramount importance to the council, with over 700 homes completed in the last year. A number of key housing developments are also underway in the borough, including the construction of a new scheme of 235 apartments and 26 riverside houses at Victoria Way started in February 2018 and the redevelopment of the Danemore sheltered housing scheme in Tenterden for which construction started in May 2017.

Ensuring public confidence in the planning system is a key aim of the council, and the Planning and Development service has maintained high levels of performance in the last year - across more than 1300 planning decisions taken in 2017, over 90% of decisions were approved and over 85% decided within 8 weeks.

The council submitted its Local Plan to the planning inspectorate in December 2017, with the public examination of the plan beginning in April 2018. The Local Plan sets the framework for housing and business space growth in the Borough, seeking to meet a target of 16,120 homes, deliver 11,100 jobs and 66 hectares of employment land.

The involvement of local communities in the planning process is a top priority, with 6 designated neighbourhood areas within the borough in addition to the existing adopted neighbourhood plans for Pluckley and Wye with Hinxhill. A public consultation on the WYE3 Masterplan was also launched in March 2018.



Active and creative Ashford

PRIORITY 3

ACTIVE AND CREATIVE ASHFORD: HEALTHY CHOICES THROUGH PHYSICAL, CULTURAL AND LEISURE ENGAGEMENT

Our Aspiration:

To provide or enable a range of quality leisure and cultural activities where people can make healthy and affordable lifestyle choices and enjoy assets that create attractive, desirable and active communities

Active and Creative Ashford

Over 12,000 people attended last year's Create festival, contributing an estimated £123,000 to the local economy. In addition, the 'Create Platform' debuted – a week-long programme of free and ticketed arts events in Ashford leading up to the festival itself featuring street entertainers, artists, theatre and live music. The council has committed to maintaining the Create Music Festival as a free festival and a focal point of the borough's cultural offer, championing local talent with 75% of acts at the festival being from Kent, and 39% of acts featuring one or more Ashford residents.

In October 2017 it was confirmed that the streets of Ashford will be transformed into an enchanting trail of beautifully crafted, giant Snowdog sculptures. Themed on the sequel to Raymond Briggs' classic story, The Snowman, local and national artists will decorate 30 Snowdog sculptures supported by over 25 local organisations and businesses. The trail will be displayed in Ashford during autumn 2018.

A number of community assets have been refurbished and supported to enable further sporting and community activity including Kingsnorth Recreation Centre, Cuckoo Park and Kestrel Play Area. Additionally, Repton Connect, a new community building and garden is due to open this summer.

The council remains committed to safeguarding public health and helping everyone lead healthy lives through providing a wide ranging leisure offer and working with partners to address priority health issues in the borough. The percentage of active adult residents increased to over 67% in 2017, while effective multi-agency work has seen the rate of smoking in the borough drop by 9%. Ashford also hosted the Wellbeing Symposium in February 2018 – the UK's leading symposium for the latest thinking on wellbeing in the workplace, community and for the individual.



PRIORITY 4

ATTRACTIVE ASHFORD: COUNTRYSIDE AND TOWNSCAPE, TOURISM AND HERITAGE

Our Aspiration:

To achieve an environment that creates higher standards of public space design, alongside improved standards of presentation of key green spaces. To safeguard and conserve our local heritage and areas of outstanding landscape quality to ensure the very best attractive environment with thriving and vibrant town centres

Attractive Ashford

The borough's recycling performance continued to improve in the last year, with DEFRA confirming that 55% of waste collected in the borough is being recycled, meaning that Ashford is the best recycling local authority in Kent and the 35th best in the country.

Aspire Landscape Management, the council's in-house grounds maintenance service, celebrated its first anniversary in October 2017. In just over a year and half of operation the Aspire team have transformed the presentation of the borough whilst maintaining a reactive, flexible team that can respond quickly to changing priorities.

Commemorating, celebrating and promoting the Borough's history and heritage is a key priority for the council, with a service commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Cambrai held in the town in November 2017 and the announcement in March 2018 that the council will host the 'Fields of Battle, Lands of Peace 14 – 18' photographic exhibition in June 2018.

The exhibition commemorates the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War and will be displayed for public viewing in the Memorial Gardens. A programme of commemoration events around the exhibition will take place across the town throughout June 2018.



Underpinning principles

PRIORITY 5

ASHFORD'S UNDERPINNING PRINCIPLES

Our Aspiration:

To remain a well-resourced council, with effective governance, high quality services, good communications, safe surroundings, demonstrating good compliance and high standards.

Ashford Borough Council remains committed to delivering high quality services to the residents of the borough at the lowest level of council tax in Kent, and has been recognised for its approach through nominations for Council of the Year and Entrepreneurial Council of the Year at the 2018 Local Government Chronicle Awards.

In addition, the council won Engagement Team of the Year at the 2017 Engagement Excellence Awards and has been a finalist in both the 2018 Inside Housing UK Housing Awards and 2018 Housing Heroes Awards.

As part of our commitment to ensuring that we are operating effectively as an organisation, the council has welcomed officers and Councillors from other authorities to assess its practices and performance through the Local Government Association Peer Challenge, with reviews of the Planning and Development service and the council's corporate governance taking place in 2018.

In 2018 we surveyed 10,000 borough households to gather residents' views on the council, its services and how we communicate with you. The results of this survey will be presented to Cabinet later this year. 2018 also saw the launch of Ashford For You, the council's new quarterly magazine which will be delivered to every household in the borough.



