

Ashford, Kent

people
serving
people



Ashford Borough Council
Annual Report
April 2013 - March 2014

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GERRY CLARKSON, CBE

Leader, Ashford Borough Council

Welcome...

...to the first of our new Annual Reports, in a year where we have achieved considerable success for the borough of Ashford and of which we can all be very proud. This is not to say that we are in any way complacent, and we know that there is still a lot more to achieve.

I would like to share some of the Council's achievements and milestones with you... and none more so than where we all worked together to make a great success of our new recycling scheme.

We also welcomed John Lewis to Ashford and thousands celebrated the Create and Tentertainment festivals. It was at the end of the same year where we took the decision to freeze Council Tax for the next two years.

There is much to look forward to over the coming year, and I cannot wait to share news of our continued progress with you all next year.



JOHN BUNNETT,

Chief Executive, Ashford Borough Council

The Council has made good progress in achieving its priorities whilst maintaining the standards of frontline services which residents expect.

Our new leadership and priorities in our Focus 2013-15 strategy have provided direction and this Annual Report shows the diverse range of achievements made for the benefit of the borough. Working with strong leadership and direction from the elected members, we in turn will ensure that we continue to maintain a professional focus on delivering Ashford's fullest potential.

ourborough

- some key facts

Over **120,000**
people live here, although
we are the least densely
populated borough in Kent

*(source: 2012 KCC mid-year
population estimate)*

The borough
is in the top
7%
of the most desirable
places to live in the UK

*(source: 2011 Halifax
Quality of Life survey)*

7,500
new jobs have been created
here in the last ten years

*(source: Annual Business Enquiry
and Business Register)*

Over **500,000**
employees live within a
40 minute drive time
of Ashford

We have the most apprentices in Kent –

2,500

in the last two years -
and ambitious plans for an
international college
campus here in Ashford

*(source: Department of Business,
Innovation and Skills)*

The
surrounding
Kentish countryside
offers stunning walks
through forests and charming
villages, plus the multi
award-winning
Chapel Down Wines vineyards
in Tenterden and Biddenden
Vineyard and Cider
Works

84,000m²
of employment space was
created from 2009 to 2012

*(source: KCC employment land
completions survey)*

We are
38
minutes from London via
high speed rail from Ashford
International Station, with
international connections
to Paris, Brussels, Lille
and beyond

our achievements

Photo: Chris Henry



**The recently
redeveloped Stour
Centre hosts the world-
famous Jasmin Vardimon
Dance Company, which
works with local schools
to promote the arts**

We have one of Kent's
largest cinemas and an
award-winning arts venue at
Revelation St Mary's

The **Julie Rose Stadium**
provides an international
standard athletics venue,
soon to be complemented
by a new country park at
Conningbrook Lakes

**Aurora
Orchestra,**
offering accessible
orchestral music, has
added to its extensive UK
and international touring by
agreeing a residency of at
least two performances
a year at St Mary's
Ashford

75
sports people from
Ashford represent Britain
or Kent in a wide range of
sports and abilities, more
than in any other borough
in the county

More than
3 million
people a year visit the
Designer Outlet, whilst
the town boasts quality
shopping and a new
John Lewis at Home

our highlights

- throughout the year

MAY

Work began to transform the Charter House office block into the new Panorama, 234 one and two bed executive apartments at the heart of the town centre.

AUGUST

Ashford became one of the first towns in the UK to receive the revolutionary 4G mobile services, making it one of the most connected places in Europe.



APRIL

APRIL

Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal, President of the Rural Housing Trust, visited Godmersham to see how affordable homes make rural life possible for local people. Ashford leads the way on new affordable homes in rural areas, building almost half of all those in Kent.

MAY



JULY

JULY

13,000 people and 170 bands helped celebrate the 18th birthday of the Create Music Festival, one of the South East's largest free music events, in Victoria Park.

Revelation St Mary's won the coveted East Kent People's Awards in recognition of its popularity and engagement with the local community.

JUNE



JUNE

The Ashford Food and Drink Festival tantalised 8,000 shoppers' taste buds with Kentish root beer, local cheeses and pies, French crepes and German sausages.

AUGUST

SEPTEMBER

SEPTEMBER

Work began on the new development at Cheeseman's Green – now renamed Finberry – which will eventually include over 1,000 new homes, a primary school, health centre and community facilities.

NOVEMBER

John Lewis at Home, offering 40,000 sq.ft of furniture, electrical and homeware whilst creating around 125 jobs, opened its doors – only the tenth in the UK.



OCTOBER



NOVEMBER

OCTOBER

Local entrepreneurs were given a great opportunity to showcase their business with the opening of the Kent's-first PopUp Ashford store in Park Mall. Demand for the space has been so positive that Ashford's Town Team has decided to extend the shop's lease beyond the original six months until the end of 2014.

JANUARY

After 30 years, and following extensive work by its volunteers, the Ashford borough museum was awarded full accreditation from the Arts Council.

DECEMBER

DECEMBER

Ashford and Tenterden launched a brand-new tourism website, hosted on the award-winning Visit Kent site.

Lights were also switched on across the borough to kick off the festive season.

FEBRUARY

Hadlow College was named as the preferred provider to secure the future of further education in Ashford, and the Council agreed to buy International House, paving the way for future development at the Commercial Quarter.

JANUARY

FEBRUARY

MARCH



MARCH

Ashford International Station was in the top 6% of busiest stations in the country, with 3.3 million people passing through the station between April 2012 and March 2013.

(source: Office of Rail Regulation)

The Cabinet



Cllr Gerry Clarkson, CBE
Leader,
Ashford Borough Council
Charing



Cllr Michael Claughton
Deputy Leader,
Community and Wellbeing
Bockhanger



Cllr Clair Bell
Tourism and
Rural Economy
Weald Central



Cllr Jessamy Blanford
Culture and
the Environment
Great Chart with
Singleton North



Cllr Graham Galpin
Town Centre and
Urban Economy
Stour



Cllr David Robey
Planning and Development
Downs West



Cllr William Howard
Young and the Elderly
SaxonShore



Cllr Neil Shorter
Resource Management
and Control
Washford



Cllr Aline Hicks
Housing and
Customer Services
Weald South



Cllr Bernard Heyes
Transportation, Highways
and Engineering
Godinton

Group Leaders

Cllr Gerry Clarkson, CBE

Leader of the Council,
Leader of the Conservative Group
Charing

Cllr Harriet Yeo

Leader of the Labour Group
Norman

Cllr Bob Davidson

Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group
North Willesborough

Cllr Peter Davison

Leader of the Ashford
Independent Group
Weald South

Other Elected members

Cllr. Jeremy Aaby

Victoria

Cllr. David Adley

Aylesford Green

Cllr. Harold Apps

Victoria

Cllr. Paul Bartlett

Weald East

Cllr. Neil Bell

Biddenden

Cllr. Mike Bennett

Rolvenden & Tenterden West

Cllr. Jill Britcher

Beaver

Cllr. Andrew Buchanan

Bybrook

Cllr. Michael Burgess

Isle of Oxney

Cllr. Brendan Chilton

Stanhope

Cllr. Chris Clark

Beaver

Cllr. Paul Clokie

Tenterden North

Cllr. Jane Davey

Highfield

Cllr. Mrs Geraldine Dyer

Weald North

Cllr. Peter Feacey

Godinton

Cllr. Matthew French

Stour

Cllr. Mrs Tina Heyes

Park Farm North

Cllr. Amanda Hodgkinson

Singleton South

Cllr. Jill Hutchinson

Tenterden South

Cllr. John Link

St Michaels

Cllr. Doug Marriott

Downs North

Cllr. Miss Jane Martin

Saxon Shore

Cllr. Mrs Marion Martin

Little Burton Farm

Cllr. Winston Michael

Boughton Aluph & Eastwell

Cllr. Andrew Mortimer

North Willesborough

Cllr Noel Ovenden

Wye

Cllr. Philip Sims

Kennington

Cllr. David Smith

South Willesborough

Cllr. Robert Taylor

Weald Central

Cllr. Jim Wedgbury

Park Farm South

Details of our senior staff can be found on our 'Transparency' webpages.

ourfocus

A photograph of two young children, a girl with red hair and a girl with blonde hair, looking into their respective cardboard houses. The houses are decorated with various drawings and text. The girl on the left has a house with a blue and white checkered roof and a sign that says 'WELCOME'. The girl on the right has a house with an orange and white checkered roof. A boy with glasses is visible in the background.

It is an exciting – if challenging – time and we are concentrating on the big things which will help Ashford deliver its potential. We have already made good progress in making sure these big things happen. Most would not be possible without working with our residents, charities and local businesses.

Together, we have achieved much worth sharing...



Jobs and economic growth

As a growing borough we are attracting and growing our business, leisure, retail and hospitality sectors.



Quality homes...

We all want quality homes. That is why we are striving to deliver the quality– not just of houses, but also of their environment and infrastructure – which is essential to create the ‘right’ atmosphere where people want to live and enjoy life.



...and quality places to live

It is important to all of us that Ashford is an exciting, vibrant and welcoming place. That is why we support cultural, artistic and sporting events which not only make the borough a better place to live, but bring the community together.



Value for money services

Just to make sure that our services remain right for you, we need to concentrate on delivering effective and efficient services which are responsive to your needs and provide value for money.

...On helping to create **jobs and economic growth**



A vibrant Town Centre

We all want a vibrant town centre, and as part of our successful Portas Pilot bid we set up a 'town team' of local businesses and residents to share their exciting ideas. We have a new town team manager with extensive retail experience, and just to make sure we put that extra bit of effort into the town centre in August 2013 we launched the Town Centre Action Team (T-CAT). This dedicated unit safeguards our streets by clearing litter, refurbishing street furniture, keeping walkways and flowerbeds weeded and helping to keep pavements gritted in winter. The team has made a good start and can be seen regularly in the town centre.

A footfall counter has been placed on the High Street to provide round-the-clock data and weekly updates to town centre businesses and us on how busy our town centre is and how well our projects are working, and we spent £50,000 improving signs in the town so people can more easily find places of interest.



Helping nurture the entrepreneurs of tomorrow

An empty shop in the town hosted a unique initiative to create the high street entrepreneurs of the future. PopUp Ashford, the first of its kind in Kent, was initially set to run from September 2013 to April 2014, but due to its popularity it has now been extended for the rest of 2014. So far, PopUp Ashford has helped around 20 start-up businesses - from personalised gift makers to home furnishings - to test their trade in a town centre location at minimal cost for two to four weeks. Start-ups receive mentoring on all aspects of business during and beyond their stay, and are positive about their experiences. PopUp Ashford has also hosted training sessions for local businesses on subjects ranging from how to use social media to effective visual merchandising.



An entrepreneurial approach

We are always looking at new and innovative ways to help create the jobs and opportunities Ashford deserves. That is why we took the decision to purchase International House (opposite the International Station) in early 2014, a move which will underpin the entire redevelopment of the 'Commercial Quarter' in the coming years.

Supporting rural businesses

We also recognise that rural businesses often find it just as difficult, especially those smaller enterprises which make Ashford so vibrant. We have worked with Kent County Council to bring high speed broadband to rural areas, and also provided £50,000 towards the million-pound strong Marsh Million Economic Development Fund. This exciting opportunity encourages small businesses in the Romney Marsh area and beyond to apply for £10,000 business loans. In its first three months, 25 local businesses have applied for this help to grow and expand.

'Can do' Planning and Development

To help local businesses and homeowners we have a 'can do' approach when it comes to planning and development, while protecting areas of beauty and our historic villages. We held events with communities throughout the borough to explore their ambitions and concerns, so that local people can have more influence on their future. We received over 300 applications from small businesses and others to develop their properties, and almost 1,000 from householders seeking to develop their homes. We know it's important to decide on planning matters quickly so bureaucracy doesn't get in the way, so we approved over 80% - with the vast majority decided upon within a couple of months.

Opportunity for all residents

Many of our residents have been affected by the welfare reform changes, the biggest change to social welfare in the last 60 years. We realise that getting used to these changes may not be easy for some, so we are working with local banks to promote basic bank accounts to help people receive universal credit payments when this is implemented in due course. Whilst working proactively with government on promoting local job opportunities and getting people back to work, we have also appointed two new officers dedicated specifically to helping those residents affected.



...On creating **quality homes**



We are committed to making sure that as Ashford grows, it maintains the quality and standards residents expect of the borough, with the infrastructure and environment we all want.

New lakeside country park

At Conningbrook Lakes we have given the green light to transform a former quarry into a vibrant country park with water-based activities and a lakeside village of 300 homes. We have secured early access for residents to the park so they can begin to enjoy the sports and activities on offer as soon as possible.

Quality homes at Farrow Court and adaptations for the most vulnerable

The new 100-space dementia friendly accommodation now under construction at Farrow Court, which includes a new day-care centre, communal facilities and a restaurant, will be built to our lifetime living standards. Almost £2 million of extra funding has been secured to build 12 extra homes for those with learning disabilities.

But the quality of life now is equally important to us. That's why we worked with Kent County Council's occupational therapy team to provide over £250,000 worth of adaptations from grab rails to flush floor showers in 250 homes – little changes which enable our most vulnerable tenants to live more independently and, crucially, remain in their own homes.



First quality build agreement in the UK

But it's also about ensuring that any new development meets the quality standards you expect. That is why in September 2013 we signed a quality agreement, believed to be the first in the UK, with the developers of Chilmington Green. This agreement makes sure that any development there will create a successful community with high quality standards, where people have a real stake in managing the area they live in.



New recycling service

July 2013 saw the introduction of a new recycling and refuse service. Although it took a little time for everyone to get used to the new service, Ashford's domestic recycling rates increased to around 50% within three months – with residents recycling nearly 5,000 tonnes of waste. And because we need to make sure people at all stages of life can take part, we offer an assisted collection scheme for the elderly and infirm.



recycle
for Ashford

...On creating quality places to live



Award winning, flexible arts venue

Revelation St Mary's, now in its sixth season, is an award-winning flexible arts venue in the town centre. Since being renovated a little over two years ago it has played host to over 25 quality events for 3,500 people, including sell-out shows from The Lightning Seeds, Fairport Convention, Gaz Coombes and Beth Orton, along with hosting world renowned orchestras, alternative cinema, radio plays and exhibitions.

World-renowned dance company

The arrival in 2012 of the world-renowned International Jasmin Vardimon Dance Company, with their new dance studio at the Stour Centre, greatly enhanced the range of arts available in Ashford. Not only does the company offer workshops for Key Stages 3, 4 and above, and choreographic workshops for BTEC, A-Level and degree students, but also awards a 'Jasmin Vardimon Professional Development Certificate' – offering participants a unique opportunity to train as versatile and multi-disciplinary performers whilst touring nationally alongside the company.



Photo: Alistair Muir

Kent's largest free music event

Over 13,000 people helped the Create music festival celebrate its 18th birthday. Kent's largest free music event played host to the usual compelling mix of up-and-coming local bands and a range of musical genres. Away from the music, many families enjoyed a picnic in the park, shopped at local trade stands or jumped on the amusement rides.



Activities for young people

We want to make sure that our young people have places to go and things to do. That is why over the last two years we have commissioned and supported over ten new projects or services to give thousands of young people positive activities. From HOUSE - designed by young people for young people - to the Tenterden Youth Café and safeguarding the future of Sk8side, the next generation are never short of somewhere to go.



Sport and active living

Sport plays a vital role in keeping people healthy and happy. We work closely with schools and local clubs to promote physical activity with our youngest, whilst over the last few years 15,000 people who do not usually take part in physical activity have received help and support to embrace a healthier lifestyle.

Local councillors helping local causes

2013 saw the expansion of the Ward Member Grants Scheme, funding directly awarded by local councillors to around 140 local community projects, whilst 14 community schemes also benefitted from New Homes Bonus funding.

All these projects directly supported those little things which come together to make local communities quality places to live, from maintaining village halls and play areas to helping Scouts, Guides and local festivals.



...On giving you **value for money services**



Energy efficient buildings

We hope that you think all our front-line services provide great value – and to make sure they do we manage and monitor them regularly to make sure they are as efficient and effective as possible. That is why we have invested in a new combined heat and power (CHP) energy system for our offices and the Stour Centre which will make the buildings more efficient and save us over £1 million in energy costs over the next 15 years.

Keeping the lowest council tax in Kent

We know council tax payers shouldn't have to pay more than necessary, which is why in February 2014 we took the decision to freeze our part of council tax for the next two years, making sure that we keep the lowest council tax in Kent, and remain among the lowest quarter of districts in the country. We have a proven track record of delivering cost-effective services, allowing us to freeze our share of council tax for four out of the last five years.



Helping residents to help themselves

Online communication and information sharing is ever-more important to our residents. We redesigned our website with simple navigation and helpful menus to make it easier for you to access our services. In April 2013 we introduced a 'self-help' service for money matters like paying council tax. Around 15,000 people were able to help themselves within the first four months, and we also increased the number of phone lines by 50%, freeing up staff to deal with more complicated enquiries.



**suddenly
everything
clicks**

www.ashford.gov.uk/online
Why wait in a queue?
ashford.gov.uk is your council - online
Pay - Report -

Taking advantage of technology

Our housing tenants are now able to report non-emergency repairs 24 hours a day through our website, and last year almost 1,000 took up the opportunity to do so. We also have a network of tenants from across the borough on our 'Ashford Back Chat' database who give us feedback on how we're doing and ways we can improve our service.

Proactive support for residents

Although the economic climate has improved over the year and Ashford's unemployment remains at one of the lowest levels in Kent, it remains tough for some residents. Although changes in welfare reform and council tax benefit have put pressure on some of our services, we have been on the front foot to help residents to prepare for Universal Credit and through early intervention have been able to reduce the number of people having to be placed in bed and breakfast accommodation.



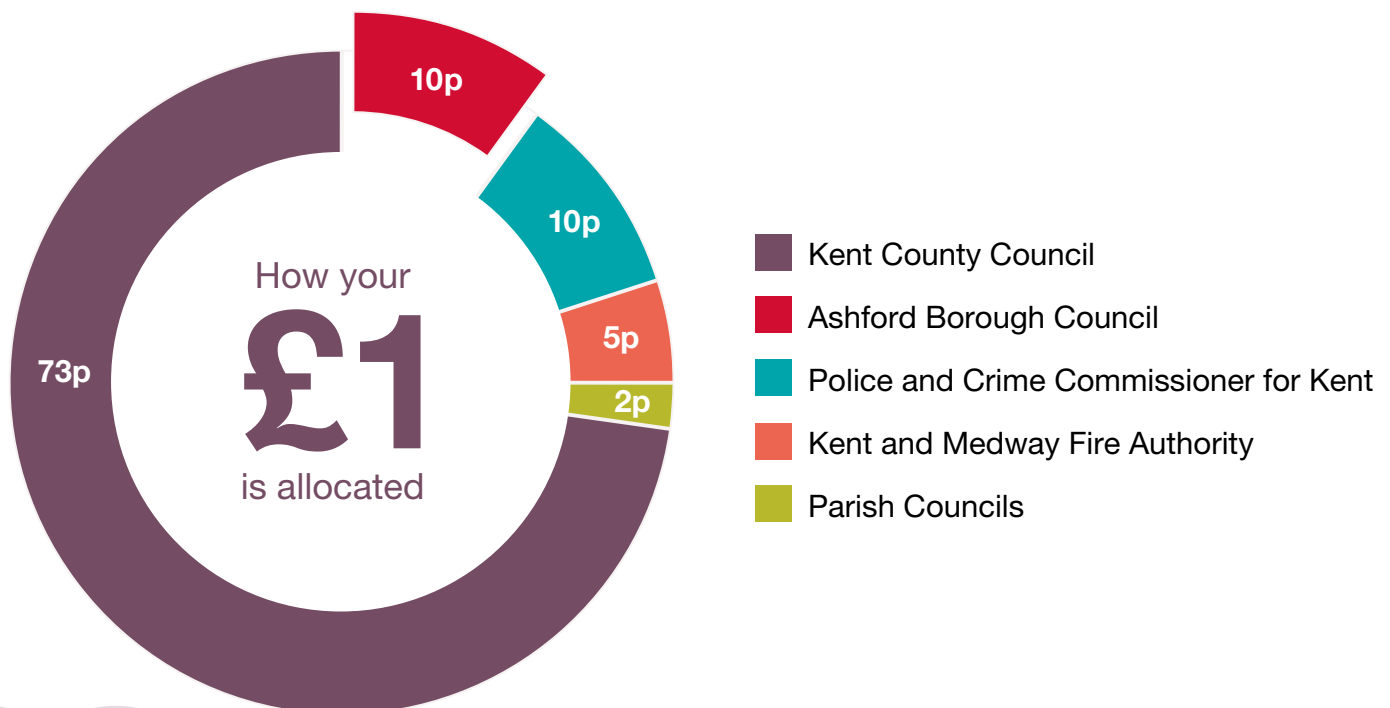
our financial summary

We realise that it is important not only to achieve much, but to do so while keeping our spending – and your council tax bills – to a minimum. This is why Ashford's council tax remains one of the lowest in the country (based on Band D Council Tax per average taxable property). We provide all of your local services for under £2.80 a week.

Here's a summary of how we spent your money last year. To make sure we continue to offer real value, we manage and monitor our spending regularly to make sure they continue to meet our criteria and your standards.

The pie chart below shows where your council tax goes. Although Ashford Borough Council is responsible for collecting the Council Tax payments made by Ashford residents, we only keep around 10p for every £1 you pay to provide our own services, and distribute the rest to Kent County Council, Kent Police, Kent Fire and Rescue and the parishes.

**Ashford Council
Tax remains
the lowest in
Kent - under
£2.80 per week**



This table shows you how much money was allocated to each service area within the council during 2013/14, and how this compares to 2014/15, how much is spent on each service per head of population.

SERVICE AREAS	2013/14 £000	2014/15 £000	Per Head £
Cultural	4,704	1,763	14.47
Environmental	5,637	7,774	63.82
Planning	2,763	3,026	24.84
Highways & transportation	1,707	1,408	11.56
Housing	55,621	68,270	560.45
Central services to the public [†]	14,050	6,974	57.25
GROSS EXPENDITURE	84,482	89,215	732.40
Less grants & other income	-69,958	-73,170	-600.68
NET EXPENDITURE	14,524	16,045	131.72
Less contribution to reserves	-734	-2,336	-19.18
SUBTOTAL	13,790	13,790	112.54
Budget requirement financed by:			
Less Government grants	-7,800	-7,622	-62.57
Collection fund surplus	0	0	0
FINAL FUNDING REQUIREMENT	5,990	6,087	49.97

[†]Central services to the public includes the administrative and organisational costs of the council, including some front-line services



**...This is just a snapshot of
Ashford's achievements and
the services we provide. For
full information, including
details of your local
councillors, find out more at
www.ashford.gov.uk**



**Ashford Borough Council
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