

2020/21 Annual Governance Statement

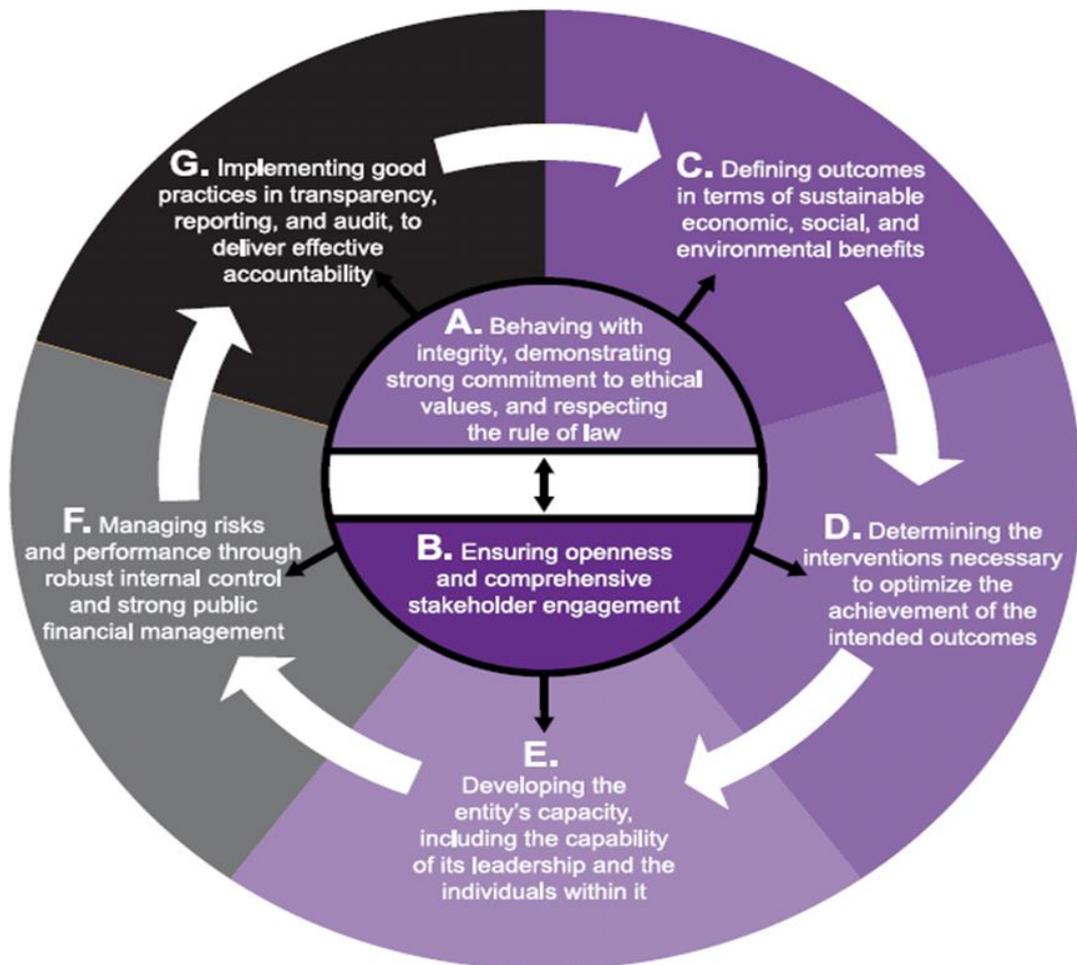
Scope of responsibility

1. Ashford Borough Council is responsible for ensuring its decisions and business are conducted according to the law and proper standards. The council must ensure public money is properly accounted for and that all resources are applied efficiently and effectively in order to secure best value for its residents and taxpayers.
2. In accordance with the requirements for revised governance models contained within the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, Ashford Borough Council formally adopted the "Executive Leader" model in December 2010 and it came into being immediately following the May 2011 Election. Under this legally defined model all functions that hitherto fell to the Executive (Cabinet) are now discharged solely by the Executive Leader, whether personally or through delegated powers.
3. The production of an Annual Governance Statement (AGS) is a requirement of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015, regulation 6(1). Good governance is fundamental to meeting the council's responsibilities and achieving high levels of service for residents. The Statement explains the effectiveness of the governance arrangements for the year ending 31 March 2021 and sets out any action for planned improvements in the coming year. This statement provides assurance to the council and its stakeholders that good governance arrangements are in place.

The Local Code of Corporate Governance

4. In 2016 the Council adopted an updated [Local Code of Corporate Governance](#), which follows principles contained in national guidance and produced by CIPFA and SOLACE.

The code sets out seven principles shown in the diagram on the next page:



5. The main principle underpinning this Code is that the council's governance processes and structures focus on delivering sustainable economic, societal, and environmental outcomes.
6. The council meets the principles in the Code through a framework of policies, procedures, behaviours and values. This framework provide Members and officers with effective tools and consistent governance arrangements across the organisation.
7. The diagram makes it clear that good governance is dynamic, and that the council should be committed to continuous improvement.
8. This AGS sets out:

Part 1: how the council is dealing with improvement areas identified in last year's AGS.

Part 2: how the council complies with the principles of good governance set out within the Local Code.

Part 3: any planned changes to the council's governance arrangements for implementation during 2021/22.

Part one: dealing with last year's key improvements areas

1. The 2019/20 AGS identified five key improvement areas. Progress on remedying these governance exceptions has been reported to the Audit Committee during the year and is set out below:

Review the contract standing orders

2. The council has Contract Standing Orders (CSOs) which is an internal document detailing the rules and regulations relating to the procurement of Works, Goods (Supplies) and Services. The last review of the CSO's took place in 2015 and therefore a further review was required to amend the financial thresholds, review delegations and update the document in line with current legislation. The review took place earlier this year and the amendments were agreed at Full Council on 16 July 2020.

Review the Key Performance Indicator Suite

3. The review of the council's key performance indicators (KPIs) was originally intended to ensure that the council was delivering the ambition of the new Corporate Plan which was being developed at the time the 2019/20 Annual Governance Statement was issued. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, a Recovery Plan has been adopted alongside the Corporate Plan. The review of the KPIs has therefore looked to ensure out measures are focused on Recovery across the themes of:

- Organisation Change and Workforce Development
- Regeneration, Infrastructure and Placemaking
- Community Recovery
- Economic Recovery

4. The new KPIs were adopted together with the Recovery Plan by the Cabinet in July 2020 and Full Council in October 2020. How the council is performing against the KPIs is being monitored by the Executive Leader and the Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committee. In addition, a Recovery Plan Monitoring Advisory Group has been established and is meeting regularly to provide Member oversight of these measures together with the actions set out in the Plan.

Develop an Equalities Policy

5. In line with Equality Act 2010 and Public Sector Equality Duty, the council has recently reviewed and adopted new Equalities Objectives which are set out within the Recovery Plan. The next step is to articulate the delivery of the objectives

through a policy document. The draft policy is currently being drafted. The impact of Covid-19 has meant a slightly extended timescale for delivery but it is currently expected that the Policy will be brought to the council's Cabinet for adoption in the Spring of 2021 and therefore this improvement area will be carried forward into the next council year.

Work towards compliance with website accessibility guidelines

6. New websites have had to comply with working towards the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines since 22 September 2019, so significant efforts have been made to ensure our previous website (which was classed as new due to a rebrand two years ago) was as accessible as possible up until it was replaced by our new site on 2 August 2020.
7. The new website is being developed in phases so work continues to maximise its' accessibility. An audit by Smarter Digital Solutions was carried out in July 2020, just before the new website went live. This flagged several issues, such as navigating the website with a keyboard only, which we rectified before the website went live. We have combined manual tests of the site with automated testing through our SiteImprove software. Our current SiteImprove accessibility score is 81.2/100. We are now addressing the outstanding issues to bring the score up even higher. We continue to update the [accessibility statement on our website](#) to reflect our accessibility, removing issues from the statement once they are resolved.
8. Pdf documents have been the biggest barrier to website accessibility. All pdfs that have been uploaded to the website since 22 September 2019 have been formatted to be accessible for screen readers before they are published on the website. We are continuing to work our way through formatting our historic documents, or converting them to webpage content. Good progress has been made with approximately 600 accessible pdfs uploaded to the new website since it launched in August 2020.

Review of Record of Processing Activity

9. Each council service maintains a Record of Processing Activity (RoPA) which were created when the General Data Protection Regulation came into force. The RoPAs set out information about the types of data processed by services, retention periods and the legal basis for the processing. Over the past year, the council's Corporate Information Governance Group has been holding dedicated sessions with council services to review their RoPAs with a particular focus on retention to ensure compliance and recommend proportionate solutions where required. Whilst the

Group did not meet regularly during the first Covid-19 lockdown period, it has reconvened and continues with this work.

Update of Committee report template and associated guidance

10. Reports to the council's committees are consistently presented through the use of a corporate committee template. The template ensures that due consideration has been given to relevant factors to inform decision makers such as equalities impact, financial implications, risks and consultation. The committee template has been reviewed to ensure that all relevant implications are considered, new guidance issued and a briefing to council managers on changes to the template has taken place. New implications for report authors to consider include legal, sustainability, risk appetite and data protection.

Part 2: compliance with the principles of good governance set out within the Local Code

1. The Covid-19 Pandemic has had a significant impact on the way we work over the past year. Our governance arrangements have provided a strong base from which we have responded to the pandemic whilst maintaining essential service delivery. This section of the AGS sets out how we have complied with the principles within the local code both in our response to the pandemic and through our 'normal' service delivery.

Principle A – Behaving with Integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law

Sources of Assurance

Behaving with Integrity	
	Members' Code of Conduct
	Annual staff performance appraisals
	Declarations of interest made at meetings
	Standards Committee including independent person
	Register of interests & hospitality
	Whistleblowing policy
	Complaints policy
	Open and accessible public meetings
	Social media guidance
Demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values	
	Constitution
	Staff recruitment, retention policies
	Staff competency framework
	Procurement policy, including social value
	Equalities objectives
Respecting the rule of law	
	Constitution
	Job descriptions for all staff and Portfolio Holders
	Support provided for all committees
	Monitoring Officer
	Committee Terms of Reference
	Cabinet report template
	Anti-Fraud and Corruption policy
	Bribery Act 2010 Policy Statement
	Anti-Money Laundering Policy

Behaving with integrity

2. All agendas for council meetings seek declarations of interest and the type of interest. Ad hoc advice on interests is regularly sought from the Monitoring Officer and his staff by borough Councillors and parish clerks/councillors. This demonstrates a good level of understanding and a culture of compliance with the code of conduct in relation to interests. The monitoring officers annual report each year deals with the activity under the council's ethical framework.
3. The Monitoring Officer's annual report to the Standards Committee to assess activity in probity and related governance matters and includes complaints to the Ombudsman. The Standards Committee monitors any issues of probity raised in Ombudsman investigations. The Monitoring Officer's most recent report in January 2021 (covering Ombudsman complaints 1st April 2019 to 31 March 2020) showed that the number of complaints had decreased on the previous year and of 17 complaints, 3 were fully investigated and upheld. Unfortunately, the Ombudsman did comment that the remedies were not completed in the agreed timescales and this has been noted.
4. All new staff and Members receive induction and training upon arrival. For staff, the induction pack includes both a copy of the staff Code of Conduct, and the council's customer service values.

Demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values

5. The council has adopted corporate values – Ambitious, Creative and Trustworthy that are embedded into the council's governance framework. For example, they are incorporated into the recruitment and appraisals processes and are categories at the annual staff awards ceremony.
6. The annual appraisal process is also based on a 'competency framework'. The framework has been developed and reviewed over several years in order to achieve a certain set of professional and key behaviours that staff display every day within their roles.
7. The framework continues to evolve to support staff to be the best they can and evidence this in a fair and consistent manner. The competencies are used for recruitment and selection; performance management including appraisals and training and development. The competencies have been reviewed over the past year in order to reflect the council's values; Ambitious, Creative, Trustworthy and training has been provided on both the competencies and how to evidence them.

AMBITIOUS	CREATIVE	TRUSTWORTHY
Positive	Innovative	Professional Behaviour
Continuous Improvement	Open to Change	Accountable
Commercial and Enterprising	Decision Making and Problem Solving	Communication

8. The corporate training programme reflects the council's strong commitment to ethical values with topics in the 2020/21 programme including 'Sustainability Friends', diversity and inclusion and safeguarding. There has also been an emphasis on emergency planning with strategic leads attending Multi Agency Gold Incident Command (MAGIC) training.
9. The council has always maintained a programme focused on staff wellbeing which has been particularly important this year with the majority of staff working from home. Part of the Covid response has been to increase the frequency and broaden the topics of the staff wellbeing programme. All mental, physical and financial pillars of wellbeing were covered during an initial six week daily dose of wellbeing schedule. The content has continued to be delivered once or twice a week and remains a mix of proactively researched messages and nationally developed campaigns from the NHS or other partners.
10. As well as an all staff email this content has been shared on the My Ashford Rewards Smarthub meaning that employees without work email or the intranet have had access to this wellbeing information via the site or app. Individual staff feedback has been positive with some managers also choosing to discuss the content at team meetings.
11. For the first time the council has also offered to pay for winter flu vaccinations for employees, understanding the benefits for this to the individual, organisation and NHS.

Respecting the rule of the law

12. As a statutory body the council's structures for decision-making, its rules and its processes are influenced by legislation and associated regulation. A fundamental part of our governance, therefore, is the Constitution.
13. The Constitution is a legal requirement and sets out how the council runs, how it makes decisions and the guidance to be followed. Some of these processes are needed by law, while others are chosen by the council. The Constitution has several chapters, which set out the basic rules governing the council's business. More detailed procedures and codes of practice are set out in accompanying rules

and protocols.

14. Parts of the Constitution are periodically reviewed and changes made to ensure arrangements assist the council in achieving its ambitions and its responsibilities to its residents and taxpayers. It is proposed to review the constitution to the in particular the presentation of the Executive arrangements contained in the Constitution.
15. The template used for committee reports provides for legal implications of potential decisions to be fully set out and considered. As described in Part 1, the template was reviewed during 2020/21 to ensure all implications reflected council policy and legislative requirements.
16. The council has clear policies for dealing with breaches of legal and regulatory duties effectively. For example, in accordance the General Data Protection (GDPR) Act, the council has in place a Breach Management Policy and has trained all staff on how to respond in the event of a breach to ensure compliance with the law. Similarly protocols are in place that respond to the council is meeting its obligations set out in the Health and Safety at Work Act.
17. The council has Contract Standing Orders (CSOs) which is an internal document detailing the rules and regulations relating to the procurement of Works, Goods (Supplies) and Services. The CSOs where comprehensively reviewed and communicated to staff in 2020 with changes being made to the financial thresholds, review delegations and to bring them in line with current legislation.

The principal features of the Constitution



18. A variety of Boards, working groups and advisory committees covering different topics are constituted each year to deliver the business of the council to the benefit of residents and stakeholders.
19. All boards, committees and groups have clear objectives which are set out in their terms of reference and reviewed annually.
20. In 2020 the Ashford Critical Emergency Resilience Committee (ACER) was stood up to lead the overall command and control of the council's response to the Covid-19 outbreak. ACER consists of both elected members and senior officers and ensures that our response to emergencies is coordinated and we are in the strongest position to protect our residents, businesses and staff.
21. ACER met regularly throughout the outbreak overseeing the work of three further groups that were set up specifically to respond to the pandemic. These groups were the Emergency Support Group, Business Support Group and Communications and Intelligence Group. Each group had clear terms of reference which were approved by ACER and met regularly to discuss interventions and updates, which were reported back to Business Continuity Incident Management Team (BCIMT), and ACER.
22. A comprehensive [report detailing the council's Covid-19 response](#) was submitted to the Cabinet in June 2020. The report documents the council's Business Continuity and Emergency Response including the governance arrangements that underpinned it.
23. An audit of the support provided to the community through the framework of the Emergency Support Group has recently concluded and provided a Strong assurance rating.

Principle B – Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

Sources of Assurance

Openness	
	Annual Report
	Council tax information available online
	Recovery Plan
	Sustainable Community Strategy
	Residents' Survey (2020)
	Quarterly Resident's magazine
	Consultation portal
Engaging comprehensively with institutional stakeholders	
	Command and Control Structure
	Ashford Strategic Delivery Board
	Ashford Health and Wellbeing Board
Engaging stakeholder effectively, including individual citizens and service users	
	Communications Strategy
	Equalities Impact Assessment Template

Other Sources of Assurance

Openness

24. The council adopted its Recovery Plan in October 2020 to put in place a framework to enable a timely and structured recovery from the economic and social impact of the pandemic. The Plan sets out to deliver a number of actions to allow the council to re-configure how it works and effectively deliver services to residents. The underlying principles are to build back a greener, more prosperous, resilient and caring borough.
25. The Recovery Plan includes the long-term ambition for the borough that will continue into the next Corporate Plan. In preparation for the Corporate Plan a great deal of research and engagement was carried out through the commissioning of a study 'Ashford Futures' to develop an aspirational ambition for the borough. The study culminated in a report 'Ashford Ambition, shaping a prosperous, sustainable and inclusive future for the Borough in 2030 and beyond'. As this work was drawing to a conclusion, the pandemic became prevalent in the UK and lockdown meant that the remaining consultation was carried out using online methods.
26. As the implications of the lockdown became clearer; reduced income to the council, rapid introduction of different ways of working, the stalling of the economy and disruption and hardship to many local people, it became evident that a Recovery Plan should be developed to provide local leadership and

direction to enable a timely recovery in what have and continue to be challenging and unprecedented circumstances.

27. The report to the Council recognised the need for the Recovery Plan to be flexible and dynamic to enable timely responses to changing circumstances and appropriate delegations to vary the Delivery Plan that goes with the Recovery Plan were provided for. In addition, to oversee the implementation of the plan and its performance in delivering expected outcomes, a Recovery Plan Delivery Advisory Group was formed for regular monitoring.
28. An [Annual Report](#) is produced each year to keep residents, partners and stakeholders informed of performance against council priorities during the year.
29. All Member decisions across the formal and democratic decision-making process are published under statutory requirements. There is a presumption that information and decisions are taken in public, but occasionally (under Access to Information Regulations) some information is regarded as 'exempt' and not published. However, the council aims as far as is possible, to keep this type of information and decisions to a minimum.
30. The agendas, minutes and background papers of all committees (other than those which are exempt) are published on the council's website using the Modern.Gov meeting management system. The system is also used for recording officer decisions and Management Team minutes and agendas.
31. A fundamental change to our democratic decision making process during 2020 was the need to move committees online. The Coronavirus 2020 Regulations allowed Local Authorities to hold remote Virtual Committee Meetings to enable them to continue discharging their business during the pandemic.
32. ABC took up the challenge and used Microsoft Teams Live Event, which allowed the meetings to be broadcast as live and viewed by members of the public. Procedure Rules and information on etiquette are read out at the start of each Committee meeting in an introduction by the Committee Clerk. Public participation is also possible, either by telephone link, or submitting speeches to be read out – this has proved particular useful in terms of the Planning Committee. Voting on decision items is normally undertaken by way of a roll call to ensure transparency.
33. Significant effort from departments across the Council to get this up and running and to make sure everyone the right hardware and understood how to use it. The whole project was very successful and has now become second nature. We were one of the first in the country to hold a full virtual Planning Committee. There have been many learnt lessons and new practices developed which will keep hold of when the pandemic is over.

34. For staff, various internal communications are used to promote awareness of the council's overarching priorities, including the online monthly staff magazine, Root and Branch, and the Chief Executive's periodic 'walk about' briefings. These have continued during 2020 with the 'walk about' briefings taking place as live streamed events to staff.

Engaging comprehensively with institutional stakeholders

35. The council has worked closely with local and national partners both as part of the Covid-19 response and planning for EU Transition. For example, we have worked closely with the Kent Local Resilience Forum (KRF) attending all Kent Strategic Coordination Group (SCG) meetings. In the early stages of the outbreak the group met daily bringing together key public sector bodies including Kent Public Health, NHS, Ambulance Service, Police and district councils. The SCG are also in contact with a wider network of resilience forums which link to central government.

36. The SCG is supported by the Kent LRF Tactical Coordinating Group (TCG) on which the borough is represented. This Group implements the strategic decisions taken by the SCG.

37. The Ashford Strategic Delivery Board includes local partners to ensure the effective and timely delivery of major projects in the borough. Quarterly update reports are received on progress towards delivery of these projects and the partners work together to address any barriers to progress as and when they emerge. The Board is supported by a Strategic Co-ordination Team whose membership comprises high-level officers from the council and stakeholder organisations.

38. The Board has also played a significant role this year in bringing together partners on important issues including the implications of EU Transition and nitrate neutrality for the Stodmarsh Nature Reserve. Partner attendance this year has included Natural England, Department for Transport and Southern Water in addition to regular attendees such as KCC, Highways England and Homes England.

39. An all Member Briefing by KCC was also held on the EU Transition Arrangements and potential impacts on Ashford in November 2020. At this same briefing, KCC Public Health together with ABC officers provided information on the Kent Covid-19 position. A video of the briefing was shared with all staff to ensure a consistent message across the organisation.

40. The council is also an active member of the Ashford Health and Wellbeing Partnership and Community Safety Partnership; which both bring together local partners to deliver shared outcomes. These both met regularly during the year; and are attended by both senior officers and the relevant Cabinet portfolio holder. The Community Safety Partnership [Annual Report](#) and Ashford Health and Wellbeing Partnership [Annual Report](#) highlight activity

over the past year. The Council is also an active participant in the Ashford and Canterbury Dementia Action Alliance which meets on a quarterly basis.

41. The council has pledged to work with the Armed Forces to help support regular and reservist servicemen and women, veterans and service families to ensure they do not face disadvantage compared to other citizens when accessing local services. Through the Covenant, the council works closely with partners including Kent County Council, the District Councils, the Ministry of Defence, the Armed Forces and Charity Sector.
42. The council is part of the Kent and Medway Information Sharing Partnership working with other public sector bodies to ensure data sharing arrangements work smoothly and in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act 2018.

Engaging with individual citizens and service users

43. The Coronavirus pandemic has meant that the council has needed to change the way consultations operate throughout 2020/21, in-person consultations have not been possible due to lockdown restrictions. Despite the pandemic, consultations and engagement have continued to take place this year, and have all taken place online, via post or, where possible, outside. For example, the Victoria Park activity plan has been rolled out online, through social media channels and at self service areas in the park. Part of the activity plan has included the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership carrying out engagement work with park users.
44. The Housing Service ran its first virtual Residents' Forum using Microsoft Teams with tenants from various schemes which was positively received. A digital forum with housing associations was also held. The Social Housing White Paper which was published in November 2020 provides a greater focus on resident voice and influence which we will need to respond to in the coming years as it progresses into legislation.
45. Other consultation and engagement with residents and communities have taken place on specific issues and projects over the past year including:

Topic	Type of engagement
Residents' Survey 2020	Invitation-only postal and online survey to 10,000 households
The future of Bockhanger Community Centre Site	Targeted postal consultation and questionnaire and engagement with local key stakeholders
Conningbrook Lakes Masterplan Consultation	Online consultation and questionnaire
Hunter Avenue Play Area	Online consultation and questionnaire

Public Space Protection Order at Henley Fields	Online consultation and questionnaire
Oakleigh House Redevelopment	Online consultation and questionnaire
Our Garden Village – South of Ashford Garden Community	Online consultation and questionnaire, with focus groups with key stakeholders and a live event
Mabledon Avenue Development Proposals	Online consultation and questionnaire
Harper Road Development	Online consultation and questionnaire

46. The Council also undertook the Residents' Survey at the start of 2020. This is a biennial survey sent to 10,000 households across the borough, in which residents have the opportunity to give feedback on the council, the local area and their priorities for the future. The responses were analysed and a findings report was uploaded onto the Council's website. Findings were also shared with individual council services. The survey results are weighted to ensure they represent the demographics of the local population.

47. The council produces a quarterly magazine to all residents in the borough, 'Ashford for You'. The magazine aims to keep residents up-to-date with the latest news about projects and services in an informal, user friendly format. The magazine is received positively by residents and helped communicate messages to residents during the pandemic. At the beginning of June a special edition of the magazine focused on the council's enormous efforts to support our community as well as highlighting the vital work of the voluntary and community champions and signposting to further information, support and advice.

48. Digital channels of communication have been key to keeping residents informed about vital information during the pandemic. Service changes and updates were made available through dedicated [Covid-19 pages](#) on the council website as well as links to pages of interest including how to access help for food and supplies, details of voluntary and community organisations or how to access business support grants. The number of visitors to these pages was monitored weekly which helped to assess demand for different types of support and to ensure the most frequently used pages were given most prominence on the website.

49. Social media has been used to accurately target specific groups of people, increase our reach and engagement with residents and understand and demonstrate the impact of council activity by using metrics and analytics. It has also enabled swift two-way dialogue between the council and individuals. The next step will be to draw on the learning gained through the pandemic and develop a Digital Communication Strategy which will provide a framework

for delivering a digital plan that maximises the reach of our campaigns so they are as inclusive as possible.

Key improvement areas identified	Develop a Digital Communication Strategy which builds on the successful digital communications campaigns delivered during 2020.
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Principle C – Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits

Sources of Assurance

Defining Outcomes	
	Recovery Plan
	Performance and action monitoring
	Risk Management Framework
Sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits	
	Medium term Financial Plan – Capital Programme and Investment Strategy
	Records of key Cabinet decisions and supporting materials
	Equality Objectives ensure fair access

Other Sources of Assurance

Defining outcomes

50. As previously stated, the strategic outcomes sought by the council are set out in the Recovery Plan 2020. It is expected that the next Corporate Plan will be introduced in 2022 once the Recovery Plan has delivered its objectives.

51. The council adopted a risk management framework in 2018. The Corporate Risk Register is reported to both Management Team and the Audit Committee to ensure all risks are managed at the appropriate level whether they are strategic, delivery, financial or compliance risks. The Cabinet are also updated on strategic risks as appropriate. For example, a briefing on the Brexit risk register was provided to the Cabinet. Services are asked to review their risks monthly to ensure the Council’s risk profile is appropriately reflected through the risks register.

52. The council sets out its equalities objectives in line with the Equalities Act 2010 and Public Sector Equality Duty. How the council is delivering against its objectives is monitored on a six monthly basis by the council’s

Management Team. The objectives were reviewed during 2020/21 and included in the council's Recovery Plan. Building on these objectives, an equalities policy is underdevelopment and will be brought forward in the Spring of 2021.

Key improvement area identified	Develop an equalities policy which reflects the council's objectives and explains how it intends to deliver them.
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Sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits

53. The council has a planned programme of projects which recognises the need for flexibility. All projects within the programme were reviewed at the beginning of 2020/21 in light of pandemic to ensure resources were directed towards projects that would best deliver the council's Recovery Plan. The potential benefits and outcome of any new project are tested against corporate objectives and the resources available to support the delivery of the project.
54. A project management toolkit brings together a variety of tools to assist project managers in maximising the economic, social and environmental benefits of projects. The toolkit includes business case and project inception template, action logs, risks assessment guidance and project review documents for all project managers to use.

Principle D – determining interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes.

Sources of assurance

Determining interventions	
	Cabinet reports include options appraisals
	Medium-Term Financial Plan
Planning and programming Interventions	
	Recovery Plan
	Cabinet forward plan
	Risk management Framework
	Service planning aligns budgets, plans and objectives
	Communications Strategy
	Business Continuity Plans
	Emergency Plan
Optimising achievement of intended outcomes	
	Procurement Strategy includes Social Value

Other Sources of Assurance

Determining Interventions

55. Cabinet Members hold regular forward planning sessions to look ahead to determine the strategic issues facing the organisation to inform any interventions that may need to be made. These have continued virtually during lockdown.
56. The Council's Chief Executive, Director of Law and Governance and Director of Finance and the Economy meet on a fortnightly basis to consider strategic issues to advise the Members on and respond to performance and risks and changing circumstances as they emerge in an agile way.
57. A Programme Management Group meets monthly to ensure the Council's projects are aligned to the strategic direction of the Council through rigorous analysis of potential project outcomes, risks and benefits compared to other projects so that people and financial resources can be appropriately allocated.
58. The council has clear governance arrangements in place for its strategic projects. For example, a vision and strategy for the South of Ashford Garden Community was adopted in December 2020. This document sets out clear

and achievable actions to be delivered by different partners with community-led governance and long term sustainable development. The vision and strategy was underpinned by 18-months of stakeholder and wider public engagement.

59. The council's Commercial Hub meets regularly to oversee the council's commercial projects to ensure their progress is closely monitored and on target to deliver the council's ambitious commercial income targets.
60. A [Town Centre Reset](#) was adopted by the Executive Leader and the Cabinet in November 2020. It forms part of the Recovery Plan and sets out a vision for the town centre that takes account of the council's emerging Corporate Plan and the Ashford Ambition to 2030. The Reset has a clear emphasis on longer term ambitions so that our resources and investments can be targeted in the most effective way to deliver carefully considered interventions.

Planning for interventions

61. The remit of Management Team includes a focus on strategic issues and corporate governance matters, on behalf of the Executive Leader and the Cabinet. A detailed forward planning schedule ensures corporate governance issues are proactively monitored. Examples include regular performance on Freedom of Information, Data Protection, Corporate training and the Corporate Risk Register.
62. This year the council's Business Continuity Incident Management Team (BCIMT) stood up and met, often daily, to plan interventions in response to the pandemic and also to plan for the EU Transition. A key role of the BCIMT has been to review specific risk registers for both the Covid-19 and EU Transition risk registers and agree actions to mitigate risks accordingly.
63. The council's own structures feed into wider partnership arrangements which have been crucial providing a co-ordinated approach. For example, the council is part of the Kent Resilience Forum, Strategic and Tactical Command Groups who collaboratively developed various contingency plans to mitigate against EU Transition related risks.
64. A significant part of the council's preparations for EU Transition has been to work closely with Defra on the creation of a Port Health Service to be operated from the inland border facility Sevington. At the strategic level the BCP project is being overseen by an Officer Steering Group (OSG). This group is chaired by the Chief Executive and includes leads officers from each of the main project workstreams (finance, operations, legal, HR, environmental health, communications, ICT and overall project management).

The group maintains and oversees a suit of strategic level risks for the project and meets every two weeks to monitor progress, ratify decisions and facilitate the resolution of issues. Member oversight is provided to the Executive Leader and Cabinet as appropriate and updates to relevant portfolio holders. Independent assurance over the project governance provided through the Mid Kent Audit Partnership who attend the OSG meeting and will be conducting a project audit governance review in early 2021.

65. Operationally, the Council has appointed a project manager to ensure adherence with sound project management principles. This includes detailed project planning and critical pathway management, prioritisation of urgent and important tasks, and the implementation of a RAID (risks, assumptions, issues and dependencies) log. The project manager reports to the Officer Steering Group and has direct liaison with and access to, work stream leads, and members of the OSG.

Optimising achievement of intended outcomes

66. A public consultation on the draft budget is held each year. The Budget Scrutiny Task Group scrutinises whether the draft budget is sound and achievable. In doing so, the Task Group assesses corporate and overarching risks against the draft budget proposals and capital plans of the council. The Task Group produces a report with recommendations to the Executive Leader and Cabinet.
67. Human Resources oversee the council's approach towards workforce and capacity planning including regular appraisals and the provision of relevant training and development activity.
68. The council is committed to identifying and fulfilling the learning and development needs of members and officers. Officer training needs are identified through the annual appraisal process, six-monthly review and on an ongoing basis. A corporate training budget supports a training programme delivered throughout the year on topics relevant to the whole organisation.
69. Personal development planning toolkits are available to all staff through the intranet and e-learning staff development portal (Ashford Achieve).

Developing the entity's capacity

70. Organisational change is the one of the key themes in the Recovery Plan. The council has had to rapidly introduce new ways of working as a result of the pandemic. Both Members and officers adapted quickly to working from home and a Digital Delivery Scrutiny Review that took place during 2020 highlighted how the council's digital journey has accelerated at a much faster pace than originally programmed. Efficiencies have been made in areas across the council for example, virtual meetings have saved staff travel to external meetings and printings costs have significantly reduced.

71. In light of changes to the way we have been working since March 2020, HR policies have been reviewed to promote consistency, transparency and ensure the policies continue to create a positive organisational culture.
72. Whilst the council's transformation has been accelerated by the pandemic, the council has continued to deliver its planned digital delivery programme which has the aims of both improving the customer experience and realising capacity to ensure a sustainable council for the future. Items that have or will be delivered through the programme include an online application process for lifeline, a new planning IT system and virtual parking permits.
73. As well as progressing a number of digital projects, the council adopted its Service Design Principles which formed part of the Recovery Plan. The principles provide a framework within which to operate and guidelines to consider when creating services and processes. The principles were developed in consultation with staff through a series of workshops.
74. The council has maintained focus on its commercial strategy in order to generate new income streams. The 'Commercial Hub' meets regular to oversee a number of work streams that have scope to deliver the strategy such as Lifeline, CCTV, parking, garden waste, category and contract management.

Developing the capability of the entity's leadership and other individuals

75. Following a comprehensive Member Induction Programme in 2019/20, Members have continued to receive training and briefings during 2020/21 which have covered the topics below:
- Using Teams and Virtual meetings
 - Prevent and Counter Terrorism
 - Planning Training for Committee Members
 - Safeguarding
 - Stodmarsh Planning matter
 - EU transition and Covid-19
 - Budget Scrutiny for Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members
 - Licensing Training for Committee Members
 - Anti-Social Behaviour I delivered by council officers Kent Police.
76. Regular briefings are provided by the Executive Leader of the council to officers, Members and parish councils. The Executive Leader also meets monthly with the Group Leaders to communicate strategic matters.
77. During the past year, operational leadership has had to adapt to the remote working arrangements. Guidance has been provided to managers to ensure that team meetings and 'one-to-ones' between individuals and managers have continued with appropriate frequency. Corporate Management Team

has also continued to be held regularly to that key messages are communicated to all managers in a consistent format.

78. The creation of the Port Health Service has strong project governance with robust controls that include a planned audit of the project's governance arrangements. The project team has been brought together from a broad range of existing so that the broad spectrum of policies and procedures that will need to be adopted or followed by the new services are fully considered.

Principle F - Managing Risk and Performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management

Sources of Assurance

Managing Risk	
	Risk management framework
	Risks regularly considered by Audit Committee and Management Team
Managing Performance	
	Quarterly performance reporting, including to Overview and Scrutiny
	Publication of all public committee minutes and agendas
Robust internal control	
	Internal and External Audit plans and reports
	Effective, resourced Internal Audit function
Managing data	
	Designated Data Protection Officer
	Data Protection Policy 2019
	GDPR Action Plan
	Data Protection Impact Assessment
	Remote working and portable devices guidance
	Quarterly budget monitoring reports to Cabinet

Other Sources of Assurance

Managing Risk and robust internal controls

79. The council's Risk Management Framework is fully embedded with the council's corporate, service and project delivery risks registers, demonstrating a consistent corporate standard for risk identification, monitoring and mitigation.

80. As the framework articulates, risks and internal controls are identified each year as part of the service planning process to ensure that any potential risks to achieving outcomes sought are identified and mitigated against. Each risk has a 'risk owner' to ensure that responsibilities are clearly articulated.

81. The Council's risks are recorded on the council's performance management software, Pentana. Risk are reviewed monthly by risk owners which informs reporting to the council's Management Team, Audit Committee and where necessary to the Executive Leader and Cabinet on the council's corporate risk

register. The risk register is dynamic with those risks outside of the council's risk appetite reported on. During the past year, the council received a 'Sound' audit for its risk management.

82. Now the Recovery Plan has been adopted, the next step is to review the council's risk appetite levels to ensure they reflect the priority actions set out in the plan.

Key improvement area	Review the council's risk appetite statement as set out in the Risk Management Framework
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Managing Performance

83. As noted in Part 1 the council has revised its suite of performance indicators to reflect the outcomes sought from the Recovery Plan. Performance against these indicators is reported on a quarterly basis to both the Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. In addition, the Recovery Plan Monitoring Advisory Committee reviews the progress and performance of the Plan.

84. This past year, the council's Directors have held dedicated sessions with Heads of Service to consider key service actions, performance indicators and risks. These are brought together using Pentana, a software designed to provide a holistic and easily accessible overview of the organisation's performance. Pentana has also been used by the Members of the Recovery Plan Advisory Monitoring Group. This has proved an efficient way of sharing information as additional reports to what is already available on the system has not been required saving on paper reporting.

Managing Data

85. At the outset of the pandemic, a Covid-19 Privacy Notice was produced to reflect the need for the council to be able to respond rapidly and in new ways to protect the vital interest of its residents. The [Covid-19 Privacy Notice](#) was produced to reflect the need for the council to be able to respond rapidly and in new ways to protect the vital interest of its residents reflected ICO guidance and the creation of a Data and Intelligence Cell meant data protection was very much at the heart of the council's Covid-19 response. For example, advice was provided through the cell on how we could work in partnership with the voluntary sector to provide support to vulnerable people whilst safeguarding their personal data.

86. Home working which has been necessary during the pandemic has been governed by the council's remote working and portable devices guidance. There have been increased communication campaigns on data protection and cyber security, mandatory cyber security training and a hardware asset register has been created. Now homeworking have been in place for almost a year, it would be timely to review the security arrangements that are in place to consider any further measures that may be necessary and continue to communicate data protection and cyber security considerations to staff.

Key improvement area	Review cyber security and data protection arrangements in light remote working during 2020 and continue to communicate cyber security and data protection advice to staff.
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87. The council's Corporate Information Governance Group (CIGG) met during the year to consider data protection and cyber security issues. The Group brings together key officers involved in managing and protecting data. It receives regular reports on the council's performance on data protection and Freedom of Information functions and contributes towards the development of policy and communication of data protection and cyber security issues.
88. The council's Data Protection Impact Assessment Template (DPIA) is embedded in the Project Management Toolkit to ensure that data protection is at the heart of any project involving significant data processing activity. DPIAs are reviewed by CIGG in order to ensure all risks are assessed.
89. The importance of data protection continues to be communicated across the organisation with regular information provided through the council's Intranet and Smart Hub.

Strong public financial management

90. The council is required to follow statutory guidance for the publication of its accounts. Each year, this guidance is reviewed and updated, and this is reported to the Audit Committee. This informs members of any updates on the council's accounts for 2020/21, and on the lessons learnt from the accounts process in 2019/20.

Principle G – Implementing good practice in transparency, reporting and audit to deliver effective accountability

Sources of assurance

Implementing good practice in transparency	
	Annual Report
	Accessible website
	Transparency page
	Publications Scheme
Implementing good practice in reporting	
	Annual Report
	Annual financial statements
	Annual Governance Statement
Assurance and effective accountability	
	Head of Internal Audit
	Quarterly update on governance exemptions to Audit Committee

Other Sources of Assurance

Implementing good practice in transparency

91. The council has a continued commitment to transparency and meeting relevant legislative requirements. Data published under the Governments Transparency Code is available on the transparency pages of the website. These data sets include Council spending, salaries, fraud outcomes and the gender pay gap.

92. The Transparency pages also explain the Publication Scheme which details the different classes of information that are routinely made available; Freedom of Information, Environmental Information and Subject Access Requests. Also available, is a comprehensive list of the council’s policies and strategies which govern the way in which members and staff operate.

Implementing good practice in reporting

93. Reports to the council’s committees are consistently presented through the use of a corporate committee template. The template ensures that due consideration has been given to relevant factors to inform decision makers such as equalities impact, financial implications, risks and consultation.

Assurance and effective accountability

94. The Internal Audit function for the Council is delivered through the Mid Kent Audit Partnership, a 4-way shared service with Maidstone, Swale and Tunbridge Wells. The service has been delivered in this way since the initial Maidstone and Ashford audit partnership in 2005 and was expanded in 2010 to include Swale and Tunbridge Wells. The Audit Partnership provides internal audit, consultancy, and advisory support to the Council, and deliver a programme of work (an audit plan) each year. The plan is agreed and monitored through the Audit Committee.

95. A key source of assurance over the internal control environment for the Council is derived from the Head of Audit Annual Opinion. The most recent opinion was reported to the Audit Committee in [September 2020](#). The Head of Audit Partnership gave the following conclusions, and no matters of concerns were highlighted:

Internal Control: *I am satisfied that during the year ended 31 March 2020 the Council managed its internal controls to offer sound assurance on control effectiveness.*

Governance: *I am satisfied that Council's corporate governance arrangements for the year ended 31 March 2020 comply in all material respects with guidance on proper practices.*

Risk Management: *I am satisfied the risk management arrangements at the Council for the year ended 31 March 2020 are effective and provide sound assurance.*

96. A revised Audit Plan was also presented setting out adjustments to the 2020-21 plan in response to the covid-19 pandemic. The revised plan was agreed by Members and the following progress has been made:



97. Audit recommendations are made to address findings and control weaknesses, and all actions are followed up by the Internal Audit team and progress reported to management and the Audit Committee. The most recent presentation to the Audit Committee in November 2020 confirmed good progress towards the implementation of audit actions throughout the year.

98. The Internal Audit team continue to report positive levels of engagement across the Council when undertaking their work. Managers and Heads of Service are actively involved in scoping audit work and display a good understanding of internal control and risk management as part of that process.

How effective is our governance in meeting these principles?

99. The assurances noted above – both the component ‘sources’ and the other developments made within the year – provided a comprehensive overview of the council’s governance framework. **Generally these arrangements work well for the Council and allow it to uphold good standards of accountability and effectiveness.**

Part 3 planned changes to governance areas in 2021/22

1. We do not consider that there have been any significant governance issues arising in 2020/21. However the actions detailed below are in place to maintain good governance arrangements throughout 2021/22.
2. These are in bold within the report, with a short action plan summarised below:

	Governance Area	Responsible	To be delivered by
1.	Develop a Digital Communication Strategy which builds on the successful digital communications campaigns delivered during 2020.	Communications Manager	March 2022
2.	Develop an equalities policy which reflects the council’s objectives and explains how it intends to deliver them.	Compliance & Data Protection Manager	December 2021
3.	Review the council’s risk appetite statement as set out in the Risk Management Framework	Compliance & Data Protection Manager	November 2021
4.	Review cyber security and data protection arrangements in light remote of working during 2020 and continue to communicate cyber security and data protection advice to staff.	IT Manager/ Compliance & Data Protection Manager	November 2021
5.	Reviewing the Executive arrangements in the constitution to ensure they present in a clear fashion the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and to capture the new port health service.	Director of Law and Corporate Governance	March 2022

3. Through further action during 2021/22 in the areas noted above, the council’s overall governance arrangements will remain strong – and indeed will strengthen further.
4. These developments reported on to the Audit Committee during the year ahead, and will be considered fully within the next Annual Governance Statement.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gerry Clarkson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Cllr Gerry Clarkson, CBE, QFSM, BA (HONS)
Leader of the Council

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Kerly', written in a cursive style.

Tracey Kerly
Chief Executive