

2021/22 Annual Governance Statement

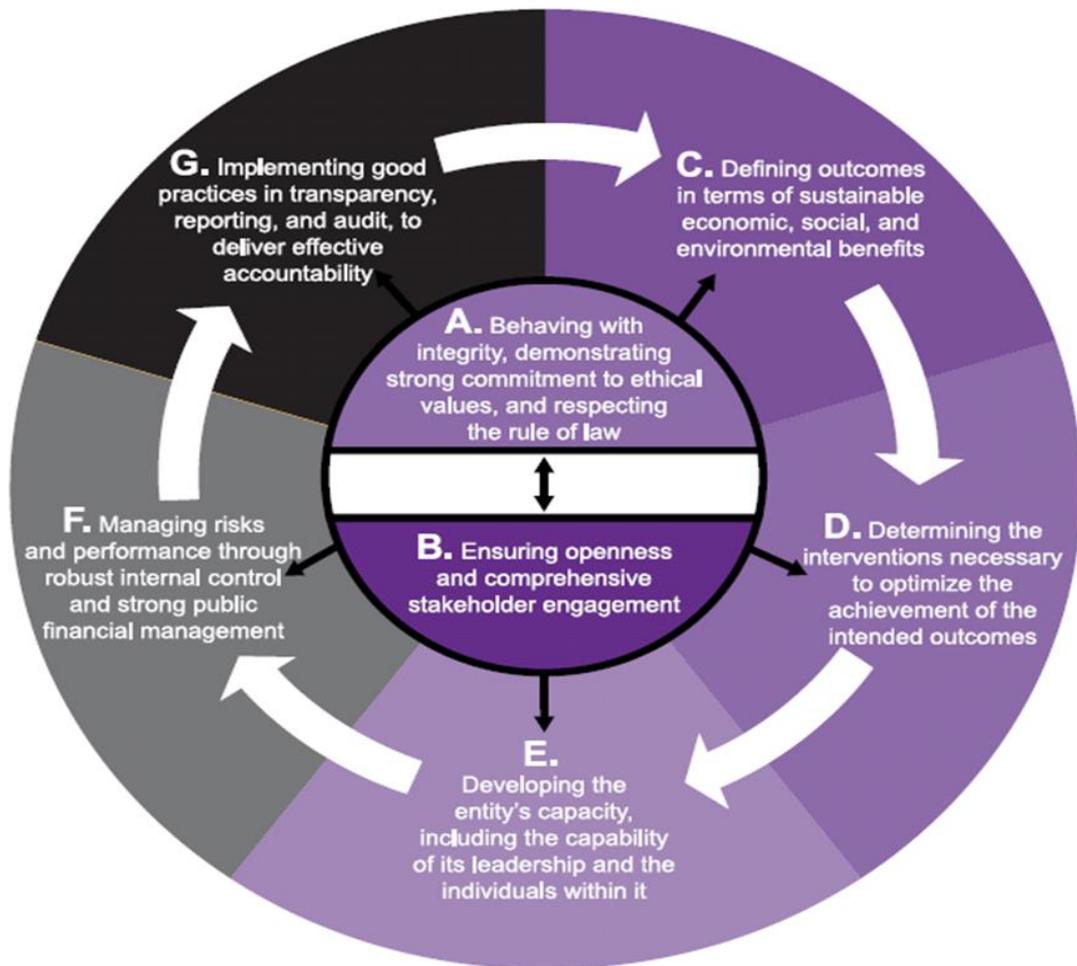
Scope of responsibility

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. 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 2022 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

3. 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:



4. The main principle underpinning this Code is that the council's governance processes and structures focus on delivering sustainable economic, societal, and environmental outcomes.
5. 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.
6. The diagram explains good governance is dynamic, and that the council should be committed to continuous improvement.
7. 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 2022/23.

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

1. The 2020/21 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.

Digital Communication Strategy

2. The Communications Team takes a digital first approach to our communications campaigns. An overarching Digital Communications Strategy has been drafted, outlining the recommended approach to communication and marketing campaigns, setting out the approach, tools we use and channels available. This formalises the general approach the team has been successfully been undertaking over the past few years.

Equality Policy

3. In line with Equality Act 2010 and Public Sector Equality Duty, the council reviewed and adopted new Equalities Objectives in 2020 and reaffirmed these as part of the adoption of the Corporate Plan at the end of 2021. In order to deliver these objectives effectively, a draft policy has been put together that includes an action plan which has been developed by a Health and Wellbeing Officer Group. The Policy will be consulted on in late February to March and it is planned to be submitted to the Cabinet for adoption in April.

Risk Appetite Statement

4. The risk appetite statement has been reviewed to reflect the council's ambitions as set out in the draft Corporate Plan to 2024. The risk appetite statement was adopted at the Cabinet meeting in November 2021 together with the Corporate Plan.

Cyber security and data protection arrangements in light remote of working

5. In addition to the range of software and systems we deploy to stop threats, a key element in the fight against the growing and changing threat of cyber-crime is staff awareness. Online training modules have been made available to all staff and Members and have been developed in association with the NCSC (National Cyber Security Centre). This has helped to reduce staff engagement with phishing attacks and heighten awareness.
6. Regular communications and training have promoted the increased importance of data protection whilst working from home stressing the importance of integrity, security, purpose limitation, data minimisation and the accuracy of all

personal data held. Aided by the utilisation of council issued equipment and appropriate two factor authentication mechanisms, cyber security and our data protection obligations are at the forefront of our working from home arrangements. 22 top tips for 2022 on data protection were published at the start of the year via the Smart Hub.

Constitutional Review

7. The Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer is working with specialist lawyers to review the constitution provisions in relation to executive arrangements and to undertake a wider health check to identify other necessary improvements and clarifications. The scoping for the health check is still being carried out. The progress is being monitored by the Office of the Executive Leader and any proposed changes will need to follow due process. The inclusion of Ashford Port Health is being dealt with separately and will be brought forward in time for the introduction of the new powers.

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

1. This section of the AGS sets out how we have complied with the principles within the local code in turn.

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 Officer’s 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 assesses 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 most recent report to the Committee in January 2022 explained that Ombudsman report on complaints for the period 1st April 2020 to 31 March 2021) showed that the number of complaints were had consistent with the year before with 18 compared to 17. However, only two were investigated and none were upheld compared to three which were upheld the previous year.
4. The Monitoring Officer’s report also covers code of conduct complaints for which there has been a significant increase in the 2021 calendar year at parish council level. Further discussion with KALC is being recommended by the Monitoring Officer to seek opportunities to reduce the incidence of formal conduct complaints at parish level.
5. 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

6. The council has adopted corporate values – Ambitious, Creative and Trustworthy (ACT) that are embedded into the council’s governance framework. For example, they are incorporated into the recruitment and appraisals processes and are fundamental to the ‘Our Principles’ section of the recently adopted Corporate Plan 2022-24.
7. The annual appraisal process is also based on a ‘competency framework’. The framework outlines a set of professional and key behaviours that staff display every day within their roles. The behaviours are linked to ACT as demonstrated in the table below:

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

8. 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. Evidencing competencies was however, not widely demonstrated during the 2021 appraisal process. In response further training sessions on appraisals and competencies are planned.

Key improvement area 1: provide further training sessions to support staff in using the competency framework during the appraisal process.

9. The corporate training programme reflects the council's strong commitment to ethical values with topics in the 2020/21 programme including 'Sustainability Friends', health and safety and safeguarding. There has also been a focus on understanding the needs of our diverse workforce and residents with training topics including mental health, transgender awareness and equal opportunities in the work place.
10. The council maintains a programme focused on staff wellbeing which has been particularly important as working from home continues for the majority of staff. The way wellbeing content is shared to staff has been refreshed and updated with a dedicated area to wellbeing on the SmartHub.
11. An audit was specifically taken on staff wellbeing during the pandemic. The highest rating on the audit scale was given (strong) with no priority rated findings and just two advisory notes. Auditors considered controls were operating effectively and when conducting similar work across Mid Kent Audit Partnership will have regard to this work as example of good internal control.
12. The council is part of the Kent and Medway Information Sharing Partnership working with other public sector bodies across Kent and Medway. The Partnership aims to ensure data sharing arrangements work smoothly and in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act 2018.
13. Sharing information is crucial to the successful delivery of local services. This Information Sharing Agreement provides a framework to enable a number of organisations and public bodies across Kent and Medway, to share personal information where necessary for explicit legitimate reasons. This Agreement provides for openness and transparency in information sharing, as well as appropriate governance and support, in order to assist signatory organisations and public bodies to share personal information lawfully, safely and securely. Our membership of the group also offers an invaluable resource to share, discuss and understand topical information governance matters.

Respecting the rule of the law

14. 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.

15. 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 for governing the council's business. More detailed procedures and codes of practice are set out in accompanying rules and protocols.
16. 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. A review of the Constitution was commissioned in June 2021 with a particular focus on presentation of the Executive arrangements. Once complete, the intention is to undertake a wider review of the Constitution to simplify its presentation with aim of making it more useable.

<p>Key Improvement area 2: Complete the review of the Executive arrangements within the constitution and commence a wider review of the whole document.</p>
--

17. The template used for committee reports provides for legal implications of potential decisions to be fully set out and considered. The template also ensures report authors consider a range of other potential implications including financial, data protection, risk, sustainability and equality. The template has been revised to ensure that legal implications are fully and properly captured in the committee report in a more consistent way.
18. 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 ensure the council is meeting its obligations set out in the Health and Safety at Work Act.
19. 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 principal features of the Constitution



20. 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.
21. All boards, committees and groups have clear objectives which are set out in their terms of reference and reviewed annually to ensure they remain relevant to delivering the council's objectives. This year the Regeneration, Infrastructure and Improvement Board was reconvened. At the outset of the year, The Office of the Executive Leader was created to ensure a forward look at key policy developments and changes affecting council services.
22. The Ashford Critical Emergency Resilience Committee has (ACER) continued to convene as and when required to respond to the pandemic and other critical issues that faced the council during the year. 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.

Principle B – Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

Sources of Assurance

Openness
Annual Report Council tax information available online Corporate Plan Regular Residents' Survey 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

23. The council adopted its Corporate Plan 2022-24 in March 2022. 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'. In addition, wider public consultation took place as well as targeted workshops.
24. In advance of the Corporate Plan being adopted, the council continued to implement and monitor the performance of its Recovery Plan. In addition to quarterly reports to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Recovery Plan Key Performance Indicators, a Recovery Plan Monitoring Group oversaw its delivery at Member level. A Recovery Plan Delivery Group was in place at officer level which has since become the Corporate Plan Delivery Group. An audit of the council's performance monitoring of the Recovery Plan took place during this period and found the arrangements to be sound.
25. An Annual Report is produced each year to keep residents, partners and stakeholders informed of performance against council priorities during the year.
26. 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.

27. 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.
28. Council meetings returned to being conducted face-to-face and in hybrid form in line with government legislation. The council has continued to use the most appropriate way of meeting depending on Covid restrictions at the time and recognising the benefits of both virtual and face-to-face meetings. In particular, there has been an increase in members of the public attending virtual or hybrid meetings and they reduce the need for travel. A project has commenced which will involve upgrading the IT infrastructure in place to support council meetings and engagement with the public for example through hybrid or streaming arrangements.

Key improvement area 3: Deliver an upgrade to the technology supporting council meetings to facilitate different ways for the public to engage for example through streaming and hybrid meetings.

29. For staff, various internal communications are used to promote awareness of the council's overarching priorities, including the 'SmartHub' which provides a central place to access council policies, procedures and systems as well as for news items to be cascaded. The Chief Executive's periodic 'walk about' briefings which have continued to take place as live streamed events to all staff.

Engaging comprehensively with institutional stakeholders

30. The Ashford Strategic Delivery Board includes the local MP and 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 comprising from the council and stakeholder organisations.
31. The Board has also played a significant role this year in bringing together partners on important issues including the successful Levelling Up Fund application for Newtown Works. The Board were also updated on Ashford College's plans for the future as well as the South of Ashford Garden Community. Key issues can also be brought to the Board and there has been a particular focus on developing a mitigation plan for the poor water quality at Stodmarsh Nature Reserve.

32. Over the past year, a Land Mapping Commission has been commissioned by the Executive Leader to undertake an independent land mapping exercise of the borough that will shape future strategies. In addition to council membership, representatives from a range of interested stake holders are included on the Commission including Southern Water, The Council for the Protection of Rural England, Homes England and the Kent Association of Local Councils and the River Stour Internal Drainage Board. The Commission are due to report at the end of 2022.
33. The council is an active member of the Ashford Health and Wellbeing Partnership that works together to deliver agreed priorities in a coordinated way. Each priority has a lead agency and is supported by a network of people to help deliver projects and programmes. Full details of the Partnership's membership and activity can be found on the council's [Health and Wellbeing Partnership web page](#).
34. The Community Safety Partnership similarly brings together key partners to prepare to work together and implement strategies to protect communities from crime and help people feel safe. The Partnership prepares a partnership plan informed by an annual joint strategic assessment. Full details of the Partnership's membership and activity can be found on the council's [Community Safety Partnership web page](#).
35. 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.

Engaging with individual citizens and service users

36. Consultation and engagement with residents and communities have taken place on specific issues and projects over the past year including:

Topic	Type of engagement
Licensing Act 2003 Policy – safety of women and other vulnerable persons	Online consultation
Draft IT Digital and Customer Service Strategy 2022	Online consultation
Bockhanger Community Consultation Event	Representatives from Ashford Borough Council and Kennington Community Council held a consultation event on Wednesday 29th September
Gambling Act 2005	Online consultation
Draft Carbon Neutral Action Plan	Online consultation
Heathside Development	Online consultation
Conningbrook Lakes Public Spaces Protection Order	Online consultation
Plantation Close Development	Online consultation

37. The Council undertakes a Residents' Survey every two years 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.
38. 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 helps to ensure that all residents receive key information about council services as well as updates on borough-wide projects and initiatives.
39. Resident use of digital channels to communicate with the council has continued to increase. For example, the number of website users increased from 573,959 in 2020 to 660,079 in 2021. In response, the council's Digital Programme continues to work to improve online services and over the past year there has been significant focus to deliver a new planning system which is due to be launched in the Summer of 2022, with the aim of an improving the customer experience as well streamlining back office processes. A new strategy is being developed which will bring together IT, Digital and Customer Services together with the aim of ensuring digital is at the forefront of improving the customer experience. The strategy is due to be adopted early in 2022/23.
40. Social media has also continued to be 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. This year we have used social media to hear the views of people on specific issues. For example a Facebook group was created in order to pose questions about various green issues including recycling and Electric Vehicle charging points as well as the Carbon Neutral action plan consultation.

Principle C – Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits

Sources of Assurance

Defining Outcomes	
	Corporate 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

41. The new Corporate Plan 2022-2024 adopted by the Cabinet in November 2021 is informed by the extensive consultation undertaken in 2019/20 (prior to the pandemic) with local stakeholders to identify challenges and opportunities and develop a long term ambition for the borough - the Ashford Ambition. The Plan was also informed by a smaller and focused follow up consultation undertaken from August to October 2021.
42. The Corporate Plan 2022-2024 is structured around three themes:
 - **Green Pioneer** - Our long term aim: Every community and individual plays their part in becoming a carbon neutral borough, through a more sustainable way of life. And the natural environment is protected and enhanced.
 - **Caring Ashford** - Our long term aim: Towns, villages and rural communities are welcoming, safe places for all who live and work in them, offering a high quality of life where everyone is valued and respected.
 - **Targeted Growth** - Our long term aim: A thriving, productive local economy supporting a range of business and industry offering good work to local people and is recognised as a high quality visitor destination.
43. These along with the council’s principles are all geared towards achieving the Ashford Ambition.

44. A suite of performance measures have been agreed and progress will be monitored and reported to Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee through quarterly and annual reports.
45. The council sets out its equalities objectives in line with the Equalities Act 2010 and Public Sector Equality Duty. The objectives were reviewed during 2020/21 and included in the council's Recovery Plan before being reaffirmed in the Corporate Plan. Building on these objectives, an equalities policy has been developed over the course of the year which will be consulted on in advance of adoption. The policy was developed by the Health and Wellbeing Officer Group, which was recently created to provide a focus for delivering the Caring Ashford theme of the Corporate Plan. All services informed the policy highlighting areas of good practice and development opportunities for the action plan associated with the policy.

Sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits

46. The council has a planned programme of projects which recognises the need for flexibility. These projects are brought together in the Corporate Plan action plan which sets out all the activities that will contribute towards delivering our objectives. The programme is overseen by the council's Programme Management Group and Regeneration, Infrastructure and Improvement Board.
47. 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. This year has seen the inclusion of a legal instruction form to aid with the completion of PIDs and ensure that legal resourcing is considered at the earliest opportunity.

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
	Business Continuity Incident Management Team
Optimising achievement of intended outcomes	
	Procurement Strategy includes Social Value

Other Sources of Assurance

Determining Interventions

48. 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.
49. The council’s statutory officers 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.
50. 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.
51. The council has clear governance arrangements in place for its strategic projects. This can be evidenced by the successful bid made for a share of the UK Government’s Levelling Up Fund which will support the Ashford International Studios/Newtown Works Project. The bid was supported by a suite

of governance documents which have since been published on the council's [transparency pages](#).

52. The council's Commercial Hub has recently been incorporated into a new Commercial and Digital Board chaired by the Chief Executive. The new Board recognises the synergies between these workstreams and will oversee their monitoring to ensure targets to deliver the council's ambitions are met.

Planning for interventions

53. 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 reports on Freedom of Information, Data Protection, Corporate training and the Corporate Risk Register.
54. The Management Team also regularly review the council's Policy Update which brings together key consultations and legislative changes being proposed by the government in order to ensure the council is responding accordingly.
55. Well-tested business continuity and emergency planning arrangements are in place that ensure the council is ready to adapt to changing circumstances. The council's own governance structures are overseen by the Ashford Critical Emergency Resilience Chaired by the Executive Leader of the council and the Business Continuity Incident Management Team. The council's own structures feed into wider partnership arrangements which are crucial to providing a co-ordinated approach.
56. During 2021/22, the Mid Kent Audit Partnership completed an audit of the council's Section 106 process to test the controls in place against risks including the recording of planning obligations, trigger points being missed, the release and spend of monies in a timely way and how monies were spent. The effectiveness of controls in place was assessed and found to be partially effective and in some cases ineffective. The overall conclusion was that the Section 106 process was found to be weak. The findings together with an outline action plan for improving the Section 106 process will be presented to the Audit Committee in March 2022.

<p>Key improvement area 4: That an action plan be developed for improving the council's Section 106 process in order to deliver the agreed actions set out in the report of the Mid Kent Audit Partnership.</p>
--

57. New ways of working that were brought about during the pandemic are continuing to be developed and refined. Whilst staff have continued to work from home in line with government guidance, work has been underway to reconfigure the Civic Centre to accommodate staff returning to the office with new service 'zones' and hot desks. As staff return, the accommodation and other needs staff may have to support new ways of working between home and the office will be closely monitored to allow the arrangements to be refined over the course of the coming year.

Optimising achievement of intended outcomes

58. 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.
59. Human Resources oversee the council's approach towards workforce and capacity planning including regular appraisals and the provision of relevant training and development activity.
60. 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.
61. Personal development planning toolkits are available to all staff through the intranet and e-learning staff development portal (Ashford Achieve).
62. In response to the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2021, a Social Value Policy has been drafted setting out our approach for how the council's procurement activities will improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the Borough. The policy has been formulated within the context of the Overarching Contract Standing Orders which guides our Procurement and Contracts Awards.

Developing the entity's capacity

63. The council regularly reviews its resourcing needs and structures it has in place so that defined outcomes are achieved effectively and efficiently. Whilst changes have been made to the 'cog' structure over the past few years, towards the end of 2021/22 consideration was given to how the senior management structure could be best organised to deliver the council's ambitious Corporate Plan. The new structure introduces three directors to increase capacity at a strategic level. It has also introduced service areas that best fit the delivery of the Corporate Plan whilst encouraging cross-

organisational working across programmes including digital, carbon reduction and commercialisation.

64. The Corporate Business Meeting allow the Leadership team including all the portfolio holders to bring forward new projects, new ways of delivery and share joint thinking and challenge to everything we do as a Council. That joint working allows the political direction against the corporate plan, government directives, changes to legislation, new funding opportunities, creative thinking and ambitious projects to be shared at an early stage and a way forward where there is sufficient support to bring to fruition.
65. Road map meetings were introduced to complement the service planning process in 2021/22. Service plans were developed for a two year period to reflect the Corporate Plan period. The Road Map meetings provided an opportunity for the Executive Leader, relevant Portfolio Holder and Head of Service to review their plans and resources in advance of the budget setting process.

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

66. Members have the opportunity to attend regular training sessions and briefings on relevant topics. The programme is detailed in the Member Training Annual Report 2021/22 and topics included:
 - Safeguarding
 - PREVENT
 - Port Health/Brexit Preparations/Kent Covid-19 Position
 - Planning Viability
 - Anti-Social Behaviour
 - Section 106 Obligations, Conditions and Developer Contributions
 - New Housing Member Enquiry Form
67. In addition there were briefings to the Planning Committee on Stodmarsh and Oakleigh House. Members also attend training on an individual basis and examples this year include licensing and budget scrutiny.
68. Ahead of the local elections that will take place on 4 May 2023, a comprehensive induction programme will need to be developed. In addition to training designed to assist with committee roles including Licensing, Overview and Scrutiny, Planning and Audit training, the induction programme will need to give a rounded view of what to expect when becoming a councillor and how the council serves its residents. In the past, a tour of the borough has taken place to familiarise new councillors with strategic projects and issues. Planning for the induction programme will commence early in the new Council Year in 2022 and be overseen by the Member Training Panel.

Key Governance Area 5: that a comprehensive Member Induction Programme be developed in 2022 ready for the new Council in 2023. In addition to legislative and committee role training, the induction should reflect learning from the current council membership and include practical information about what to expect when becoming a councillor.

69. Regular briefings are provided by the Executive Leader of the council to officers, Members and parish councils. The Executive Leader also meets regularly with the Group Leaders to communicate strategic matters.
70. After successful programmes in previous years, the Ashford Manager Programme is being reintroduced to develop the capability of individuals and assist with future succession planning. The course encompasses leading change, strategy, innovation and commercial awareness and provides the opportunity for managers from different service to develop networks and improve their understanding of stakeholders and collaborative working. To complement the programme, a wider suite of management development training is also being created to support personal development planning and to prepare staff for future opportunities. The introduction of a more structured 1:1 also encourages discussion about personal development and skills.

Key Governance Area 6: to deliver an Ashford Manager Programme and wider suite of management development training during 2022/23 to develop the skills of individuals and to assist with succession planning across the organisation.

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
	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

71. 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.
72. 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.
73. The Council's risks are recorded on the council's performance management software, Pentana. Risks 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.

74. The council reviewed its risk appetite along with the development of the Corporate Plan. The appetite was developed at a Cabinet forward planning day and was adopted together with the Corporate Plan to ensure our approach to risk was reflective of our ambitions. Individual services reviewed their risks as part of the service planning process. The next step will be for an overarching review of the risk register to ensure the strategic risks to the delivery of the corporate plan are fully captured and managed accordingly.

Key Governance Area 7: To review the Corporate Risk Register to ensure it reflects the council's strategic priorities as set out in the Corporate Plan

Managing Performance

75. The new Corporate Plan 2022-2024 is structured around three themes:
- Green Pioneer - Our long term aim: Every community and individual plays their part in becoming a carbon neutral borough, through a more sustainable way of life. And the natural environment is protected and enhanced.
 - Caring Ashford - Our long term aim: Towns, villages and rural communities are welcoming, safe places for all who live and work in them, offering a high quality of life where everyone is valued and respected.
 - Targeted Growth - Our long term aim: A thriving, productive local economy supporting a range of business and industry offering good work to local people and is recognised as a high quality visitor destination.
76. These themes along with the council's principles are all geared towards achieving the Ashford Ambition.
77. A suite of performance measures have been agreed to monitor progress and this performance will be monitored and reported to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committee through quarterly and annual reports during the lifetime of the new Corporate Plan.
78. Pentana risk management software is used to provide a holistic and accessible overview of the organisation's performance. Pentana brings together all performance information in one place and as well as generating reports for council committee meetings, can be viewed online and this has been utilised by groups including The Recovery Plan Monitoring Group and Programme Management Group. Not only does this allow for the most up-to date information to be accessed, but it also reflects the council's digital and carbon neutral agendas.

79. A 'health check' of Pentana has recently been conducted by the software providers to ensure the council is making the best use of the system. Recommended improvements will be implemented during the 2022/23 year.

Managing Data

80. 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. During 2021/22, the Group considered the privacy risks and mitigations in place for the new planning system.
81. 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.
82. The importance of data protection continues to be communicated across the organisation with regular information by way of a blog on the council's Intranet and Smart Hub.
83. Over the course of 2022/23, a review of our data protection policies and procedures will need to take place. The Data Protection Policy will need to be updated, privacy notices reviewed and Records of Processing Activity updated, particularly taking into account any departmental structure changes, tasks and activities.

Key improvement area 8: review the council's suite of Data Protection Policies during 2022/23 and service's Records of Processing Activities.

Strong public financial management

84. 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 and on the lessons learnt from the preceding year.

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
	Six-monthly update on governance exemptions to Audit Committee

Other Sources of Assurance

Implementing good practice in transparency

85. 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.
86. 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

87. Reports to the council's committees are consistently presented through the use of a corporate committee template. The template ensures that due consideration is given to relevant factors to inform decision makers including equalities impact, financial implications, risks, carbon neutrality and consultation.
88. 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 councils. The Audit Partnership provides internal audit, consultancy, and advisory support to the council, and delivers a programme of work (an audit plan) each year.
89. Based upon the interim audit assessment provided by the Head of Audit, who was in post until the end of December 2021 and assertions received from the

MKA senior management team, Ashford Borough Council has adequate management, control and governance processes in place to manage the achievement of their objectives.

How effective is our governance in meeting these principles?

90. 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 allow the council to uphold good standards of accountability and effectiveness.**

Part 3: planned changes to governance areas in 2022/23

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 2022/23.

2. These are in bold within the report, with a short action plan summarised below:

	Governance Area	Responsible	To be delivered by
1.	Provide further training sessions to support staff in using competency framework during the appraisal process.	HR Manager	April
2.	Complete the review of the Executive arrangements within the constitution and commence a wider review of the whole document.	Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer	March 2023
3.	Deliver an upgrade to the technology supporting council meetings to facilitate different ways for the public to engage for example through streaming and hybrid meetings.	Member Services Manager and IT Manager	September 2022
4.	Develop an action plan for improving the council's Section 106 process in order to deliver the agreed actions set out in the report of the Mid Kent Audit Partnership.	Head of Planning and Development	March 2023
5.	Develop a comprehensive Member Induction Programme be developed in 2022 ready for the new Council in 2023. In addition to legislative and committee role training, the induction should reflect learning from the current council membership and include practical information about what to expect when becoming a councillor.	Member Services Manager	May 2023
6.	Deliver an Ashford Manager Programme and wider suite of management development training during 2022/23 to develop the skills of individuals and to assist with succession planning across the organisation.	Head of HR and Customer Services	March 2023
7.	Review the Corporate Risk Register to ensure it reflects the council's strategic priorities as set out in the Corporate Plan 2022-24.	Data Protection and Compliance Manager	September 2022
8.	Review the council's suite of Data Protection Policies and service's in updating their Records of Processing Activities	Data Protection and Compliance Manager	September 2022

3. Through further action during 2022/23 in the areas noted on the previous page, the council's overall governance arrangements will remain strong – and indeed will strengthen further.
4. These developments will be reported on to the Audit Committee during the year ahead, and will be considered fully within the next Annual Governance Statement.