

Ashford Borough Council's Performance – Quarters 1 and 2, 2013 - 14

The attached reports were presented to the Cabinet on 12th September 2013 (Q1) and 7th November 2013 (Q2) and O&S are invited to consider them.

Agenda Item No:

**Report To
Date:**

**Cabinet
12 September 2013**



**ASHFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

Report Title:

**Ashford Borough Council's Performance – Quarter 1
2013/14**

**Report Author:
Portfolio Holder:**

Policy and Performance Officer, Nicholas Clayton
Portfolio Holder for Resource Management and Control, Neil Shorter

Summary:

This report seeks to report to members and the public on the performance of the council during the quarter. This includes information on what the Cabinet has achieved through its decision-making, key performance data on our frontline services, and consideration of the wider borough picture which impacts upon the council's work.

Key Decision:

NO

Affected Wards:

ALL

Recommendations:

The Cabinet is asked to note performance for Quarter 1.

Policy Overview:

The council's strategic direction, which informs the content of this report, is enshrined within our five-year business plan. It is important that members are informed of progress against this, and that the public are updated on progress against plans which were developed in consultation with them
None specifically arising from this report

Financial

Implications:

Risk Assessment

Not specifically applicable, but the report notes key frontline service information which is an important indicator of pressures (external and internal) on the council's resources.

Impact

N/A

Assessment

Other Material

N/A

Implications:

Background

None

Papers:

**Portfolio Holder's
Comments**

Although money remains tight for everyone, we have continued to invest in our community and our services. We have not only continued - but expanded - support to local community and charity groups by increasing grants from our own councillors and through government growth money. The wider economic picture shows signs of recovery, with month-on-month falls in both those unemployed and those claiming benefits. We are proactive in tackling issues which remain, for example with our new homelessness strategy. We have been active in pushing ahead with our priorities – securing early access to Conningbrook Lakes and supporting the future of youth services. We are doing more for less while still providing great value services which perform well.

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Ashford Borough Council

Our Performance

April to June 2013



Portfolio Holder Neil Shorter

comments on this quarter's report

Although money remains tight for everyone, we have continued to invest in our community and our services. We have not only continued - but expanded - support to local community and charity groups by increasing grants from our own councillors and through government growth money.

The wider economic picture shows signs of recovery, with month-on-month falls in both those unemployed and those claiming benefits. We are proactive in tackling issues which remain, for example with our new homelessness strategy.

We have been active in pushing ahead with our priorities – securing early access to Conningbrook Lakes and supporting the future of youth services. We are doing more for less while still providing great value services which perform well.

Economic Growth

Received 230 applications from householders to develop their homes – we decided 78% within eight weeks, and 93% of these applications were approved.

Received over 80 applications from small business and others to develop their properties, and decided 45% within eight weeks.

287,000 people used our car parks. This is around 10,000 more than the last three months.

96% of local food premises comply with safety standards.

In June the Cabinet reaffirmed its support for proposals to ensure

further education opportunities in Ashford after 2015.

In June the Cabinet endorsed a favourable lease for the Sk8side youth facilities up until the end of 2015.

In May the Cabinet approved some minor amendments to the Council's Member Grant Scheme following a review of its first year. This scheme allocated around £98,000 to community groups directly from their local ward member during 2012/13. Building on this success, for the next year members will be given £4,000 each - £1,500 more than last year to further support their community

Where the pressures are – Numbers of people in B&Bs

An average of 28 households were in B&B accommodation at the end of each month. This is higher than our target of 15 and reflects the tough economic picture for many residents. The number of families who have to use this accommodation is also increasing

What We've Done – invested in the community through the New Homes Bonus

In June the Cabinet agreed the first set of community projects to be funded through the New Homes Bonus.

These projects will help support tourism, the rural economy, the voluntary and community sector and opportunities for youth and older people.

Continuing support is guaranteed for the Create music festival, Ashford St Marys and others, whilst new funds are available for major community infrastructure projects.

Homes and Place

Over 99% of council tenants' rent was successfully collected.

In response to the rise in residents and families using B&B accommodation (see above) the Cabinet agreed to a new homelessness strategy in June. This strategy - based on a review carried out last year - provides a commitment to prevent homelessness wherever possible, with access to housing support if needed. From April two welfare intervention Officers have also been employed to assist residents

The Cabinet has also adopted a new Housing Framework until 2018, built around a number of priorities including –

- improving the supply of affordable housing
- increasing the choice and environmental quality of homes, and
- increasing resident satisfaction and involvement.

Although currently the wider economic situation has meant that the numbers of affordable homes delivered has been less than hoped for, our Affordable Housing Trajectory for this year provides a working estimate of around 150 affordable homes to be delivered.

Almost 100% of our homes have a gas safety certificate, with only two remaining without.

Around 2,500 people, including the vulnerable and elderly, have access to lifeline services. This allows them to contact us immediately if they have a problem.

Following on from its approval by the independent inspector, Cabinet has considered and agreed formal adoption of the Chilmington Green Area Action Plan in July. We are continuing to work on improving both the quality design and physical and social infrastructure of the proposed plans.

Where the pressures are – Recycling Service Roll-out

In response to substantial public enquiries relating to the recycling scheme roll out from July (we received over double the normal amount of calls) the council employed extra staff to help answer questions

What We've Done – Ensured early access for residents to Conningbrook Country Park

In May the Cabinet approved headline terms for the lease and license of the Conningbrook Country Park, ensuring that the public will have early access to the park and its facilities, which will include walking trails and nature-watching.

The same month saw planning application approval for the 300-home development which will enable the country park to be developed.

Best Value Services

In April the Cabinet agreed to invest around £60,000 in energy efficiency measures for our own buildings, including the use of energy-efficient LED bulbs. These measures will produce significant return on investment

An average of over 16% - against a target of 10% - of our customers currently use 'self help' services at the Gateway, meaning that they get answers more quickly and our staff can work more efficiently.

As part of our approach to localism, Cabinet received a review of two Parish Handyman pilots (in Aldington and Wittersham).

We have, to date, collected over 30% of council tax and business rates – slightly higher than the same time last year.

The benefits caseload has fallen consistently for the first time since 2008. From a peak of 10,450 in mid-May, by the end of the quarter the number was 1,350.

In response to the changes to personal banking brought in by welfare reform, we have held eight drop-in sessions to help residents open up a bank account.

Through constant monitoring and management, we underspent our 2012/13 budget by around £50,000. This money was transferred to our reserves for future use.

Where the pressures are – The Benefit Caseload

Although the total number of residents claiming benefits is beginning to fall, the council still receives around 300 new cases each month. This in turn increases the length and complexity of the enquiries our Benefits Assistants deal with

What We've Done – We've made it easier for customers to help themselves

In April we introduced a self-service facility for money matters related to revenues and benefits, such as for information or to pay a household council tax or business rate bill.

Around 15,000 calls have been resolved without the need for a customer needing to speak to a member of staff.

Our staff are now free to take more complicated calls, and we have increased the number of available phone lines by 50%.

The Borough Picture

310 house sales were completed during this quarter, with an average selling price of just under £250,000 – although average selling prices (to April) are around 6% less than the same time last year.

Around 1,800 residents were claiming Job-Seekers Allowance at the end of June. This is just under 9% less than at the same time last year.

Ashford Town Centre's music and arts venue Revelation St Mary's won the East Kent People's Award in June. The venue, run by the St Mary's Arts Trust (in partnership with the Parochial Church Council and funded by Ashford Borough Council, Arts Council England and Kent County Council) was crowned the winner at the Canterbury Culture Awards. The award looks for a cultural organisation that demonstrates engagement with the local community and continued efforts in developing existing and new audiences.

Agenda Item No:

Report To **Cabinet**
Date: **7 November 2013**



ASHFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report Title: **Ashford Borough Council's Performance – Quarter 2 2013/14**

Report Author: Policy and Performance Officer, Nicholas Clayton
Portfolio Holder: Portfolio Holder for Resource Management and Control, Neil Shorter

Summary:

This report seeks to report to members and the public on the performance of the council during the quarter. This includes information on what the Cabinet has achieved through its decision-making, key performance data on our frontline services, and consideration of the wider borough picture which impacts upon the councils work.

Key Decision: NO

Affected Wards: ALL

Recommendations: **The Cabinet is asked to note performance for Quarter 2 of 2013/14.**

Policy Overview: The council's strategic direction, which informs the report's content, is enshrined within "Focus 2013-15", the council's corporate plan. It is key that members are updated on progress against this, and that the public are updated on progress against plans which they have helped developed.

Financial Implications: None specifically arising from this report

Risk Assessment: Not specifically applicable, but the report notes key frontline service information which is an important indicator of pressures (external and internal) on the council's resources.

Impact Assessment: N/A

Other Material: N/A

Implications:

Background Papers: None

Portfolio Holder's Comments: There are signs for cautious optimism in the local economic picture, with a slow (but perceptible) decrease in the numbers claiming benefits, and a more rapid fall in those claiming job-seekers allowance – hinting at a strengthening job market. Undeniably, certain pressures remain on our services, such as with levels of homelessness, but we remain proactive. The last few months have seen not only a new strategy to tackle homelessness, but two reports to members on the issues. Our priorities have been refocused for the next couple of years in our 'Focus 2013-15' Corporate Plan, adopted by the Council in October. We are already active in pushing ahead with these priorities, as seen by the setting up of a new Strategic Delivery Board to tackle key economic development challenges.

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Ashford Borough Council

Our Performance

July to September 2013



Portfolio Holder Neil Shorter

comments on this quarter's report

There are signs for cautious optimism in the local economic picture, with a slow (but perceptible) decrease in the numbers claiming benefits, and a more rapid fall in those claiming job-seekers allowance – hinting at a strengthening job market. Undeniably, certain pressures remain on our services, such as with levels of homelessness, but we remain proactive. The last few months have seen not only a new strategy to tackle homelessness, but two reports to members on the issues. Our priorities have been refocused for the next couple of years in our 'Focus 2013-15' Corporate Plan, adopted by the Council in October. We are already active in pushing ahead with these priorities, as seen by the setting up of a new Strategic Delivery Board to tackle key economic development challenges.

Jobs / Economic Growth

Received 240 applications from householders to develop their homes – we decided around 80% within eight weeks, and 87% of these applications were approved.

Received around 75 applications from small business and others to develop their properties, and decided around half within eight weeks.

292,000 people used our car parks. This is around 5,000 more than the previous three months.

96% of local food premises comply with safety standards.

In July the Cabinet approved £50,000 to help set up the Marsh Million Economic Development Fund, which allows small businesses in the

Romney Marsh area to apply for £10,000 business loans.

In October the Cabinet received an update on the performance of the town centre and the Town Centre Team. Although an early feasibility study for partial covering of the lower high street identified little support, a new project supporting pop up shops has been added.

In August the council unveiled the town centre's new T-CAT team. Its four members will tackle maintenance and clean-up jobs as well as refurbishing street furniture, tending public gardens and keeping pavements gritted during winter. The team have made a good start and can be seen regularly in the town centre.

Where the pressures are – Numbers of people in B&Bs

An average of 34 households were in B&B accommodation at the end of each month. This is higher than our target and reflects the tough economic picture for many residents. The number of families who have to use this accommodation is also increasing

What We've Done – Brought partners together to focus on delivering projects for economic development

In October the Cabinet agreed to set up a new Ashford Strategic Delivery Board, bringing together key partners to deliver critical projects for the growth and economic development of the borough. The Board has identified an initial 'Big Six' projects –

- The Commercial Quarter
- Elwick Place Development
- Expanding the Designer Outlet
- An International College Campus
- Redeveloping Junction 10A
- Jasmin Vardimon International Dance Academy

Quality Homes and Places to Live

Over 99% of council tenants' rent was successfully collected.

As part of the council's new homelessness strategy, in July the Cabinet approved a tailored training programme for staff, and recruitment of more officers, to boost proactive work in preventing homelessness.

In September work officially began on new dementia-friendly accommodation at Farrow Court. The facility will include 100 high-quality living units alongside a day-care centre, hairdressers and a restaurant.

In July the Cabinet approved the designation of the Rolvenden Neighbourhood Area, enabling the local community to help shape local

development and growth through production of a Neighbourhood Development Plan.

Almost 100% of our homes have a gas safety certificate, with only two remaining without.

Around 2,500 people, including the vulnerable and elderly, have access to lifeline services. This allows them to contact us immediately if they have a problem.

In September the Cabinet endorsed a quality agreement, outlining 32 commitments, for the proposed Chilmington Green development. This statement of intent, believed to be the first in the UK, sets out guiding principles on the design, quality and community.

Where the pressures were – Recycling Service Roll-out

In response to substantial public enquiries relating to the recycling scheme roll out from July (we received over double the normal amount of calls) the council employed extra staff to help answer questions. These extra staff helped us to deal as quickly as possible with residents, and the numbers of enquiries have now returned to normal levels.

What We've Done – Proposed transfer of the Green at Churchfield Way to Wye Parish Council

In July the Cabinet approved the proposed transfer of Churchfield Way Green to the Parish Council. This will allow the Parish Council to dedicate the field as a Diamond Jubilee Field to commemorate last year's Diamond Jubilee and London Olympics.

This initiative is supported by Fields In Trust, which aims to dedicate 2012 green spaces in this way.

Great Value Services

In September the first stages of refurbishing the Stour Centre took place, helping the environment and saving more than a £1 million in energy costs over the next 15 years. The electrical and heating pipework in the Stour Centre has been reconfigured ready for the installation of a new combined heat and power (CHP) plant at the end of this year. The plant will serve both the Civic and Stour Centres and save approximately £1.2m over 15 years by reducing electricity consumption.

An average of over 16% (and increasing) - against a target of 10% - of our customers currently use 'self help' services at the Gateway, meaning that they get answers more quickly and our staff can work more efficiently.

We have, to date, collected around 60% of council tax and business rates - slightly higher than the same time last year.

Having shown consistent decreases for the first time in five years in the previous quarter, the benefits caseload fell more slowly over the last 3 months. From 10,350 in July, by the end of the quarter the number had fallen by around 50.

In response to the changes to personal banking brought in by welfare reform, we now hold regular sessions at the Gateway+ (with the support of Barclays and Natwest) to help residents open a bank account. We are currently working with government to extend this to the Jobcentre.

In September the council's Audit Committee received the findings of its external auditors Grant Thornton on last year's accounts. Our auditors commented that despite the challenging financial environment the Council continues to exercise a prudent financial strategy, with robust financial planning and budget monitoring.

Where the pressures are – The Benefit Caseload

Although the total number of residents claiming benefits is beginning to fall, the council still receives between 250 and 300 new cases each month. This in turn increases the length and complexity of the enquiries our Benefits Assistants deal with

What We've Done – We've made it easier for customers to help themselves

Due to the success of our self-help facility we have extended their use for another full year, freeing more of our staff to deal with more complicated enquiries.

In April we introduced a self-service facility for money matters such as for information or to pay a household council tax or business rate bill.

The Borough Picture

Average selling prices (to July) are around 2% less than the same time last year, although they are steady (or rising in places) during the course of the year to date.

Just under 1,600 residents were claiming Job-Seekers Allowance at the end of September. This is just under 20% less than at the same time last year.

John Lewis has announced that its new 40,000 sq ft 'at home' shop in Ashford will open its doors to customers at 9am on Thursday 7th November. Located on a site close to junction 9 of the M20 in Kent, John Lewis at home Ashford will focus on furniture, furnishing accessories, electrical and home technology.

At the end of July 13,000 people helped Ashford's Create Music Festival celebrate its 18th birthday. Headlining the main stage were britpop stars Dodgy, while husband and wife duo Trevor Moss and Hannah-Lou topped the Acoustic Stage. Away from the music, many families enjoyed a picnic on the park, shopped at local trade stands and made full use of the amusement rides on site.

4G mobile services were switched on by EE on 28th August, making the town amongst the most connected places in Europe. The superfast service will not only benefit locals, but will also make the area more attractive for potential new residents and businesses.