

Overview and Scrutiny
25 February 2014

Agenda item 5

Ashford Borough Council's Performance – Quarter 3, 2013 - 14

The attached report was presented to the Cabinet on 13th February 2014 and O&S are invited to consider it.

Agenda Item No: 5

Report To **Cabinet**

Date: **13 February 2014**

Report Title: **Ashford Borough Council's Performance – Quarter 3 2013/14**

Report Author: Policy and Performance Officer, Nicholas Clayton

Portfolio Holder: Portfolio Holder for Resource Management and Control, Neil Shorter



ASHFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL

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 3 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 Implications: N/A

Background Papers: None

Portfolio Holder's Comments It is pleasing to see that the combined efforts of our residents will see Ashford improve its recycling rate greatly since the

new contract was introduced in July. Our proactive work is beginning to bear fruit in helping residents prepare for welfare reform changes and also keeping those needing bed and breakfast accommodation to a minimum. We continue to run a financially-prudent organisation, while there have been key developments which will boost the town and help achieve economic growth – from the opening of the new John Lewis at Home store to the exciting PopUp Ashford initiative.

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Ashford Borough Council

Our Performance

October to December 2013



Portfolio Holder Neil Shorter

comments on this quarter's report

It is pleasing to see that the combined efforts of our residents will see Ashford improve its recycling rate greatly since the new contract was introduced in July. Our proactive work is beginning to bear fruit in helping residents prepare for welfare reform changes and also keeping those needing bed and breakfast accommodation to a minimum. We continue to run a financially-prudent organisation, while there have been key developments which will boost the town and help achieve economic growth – from the opening of the new John Lewis at Home store to the exciting PopUp Ashford initiative.

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 65 applications from small business and others to develop their properties, and decided around half within eight weeks while approving around 80%. This represents good performance compared to other councils.

289,000 people used our car parks. This is around 3,000 less than the previous three months, although Ashford town centre usage increased. It is also over 5,000 more than the same period during the last few years.

96% of local food premises comply with safety standards.

In December the Cabinet agreed to support the world-renowned Jasmin Vardimon dance company, already located at the Stour Centre, in its bid for lottery money to develop an International Dance Academy in Ashford. If successful, this would result in refurbishment of part of the Stour Centre to include a 300-seater performance space and further broaden the town's arts and culture offer.

In December the Cabinet also supported the development and implementation of a suitable scheme for tourist coast parking in Tenterden.

Responding to the pressures – Numbers of people in B&Bs

An average of 23 households were in B&B accommodation at the end of each month. This is over 10 less than in the previous quarter and reflects the proactive homelessness work we began with agreeing our new homelessness strategy agreed a few months ago.

What We've Done – Helped create the high street entrepreneurs of tomorrow

From October, an empty shop in the town has hosted a unique initiative to help create the high street entrepreneurs of the future.

PopUp Ashford, the first of its kind in Kent, has so far helped 12 start-up businesses – from personalised gift makers to home furnishings - to test their trade in a town centre location at minimal cost for two to four weeks.

Over the next three months, PopUp Ashford will host training sessions for local businesses on subjects ranging from how to use social media to effective visual merchandising.

Quality Homes and Places to Live

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

In October the Cabinet agreed to release over £1.5million of funding for an extra 15 units of affordable housing, supported by additional funding from the Homes and Communities Agency. Ashford leads the way on providing affordable local housing, building around 40% of all of those in Kent.

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

Following extensive community consultation, in November the Cabinet approved the allocation of community funding for the creation of a new local park – including a play space for children – at Brisley Farm. This is planned for delivery by autumn 2014.

As part of delivering the council's housing and homelessness strategies, in December the Cabinet approved the disposal of a small parcel of land at The Limes, Kingsnorth Road, to enable development of supported accommodation for eight young people at risk.

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 All Done – Greatly Improved Ashford's Recycling Rates

8th July saw the introduction of a new recycling scheme. Although it took a little time for everyone to get used to the new service, residents have risen to the challenge with Ashford's unaudited domestic recycling rates increasing to around 50% within three months – with residents recycling nearly 5,000 tonnes of waste including –

- 2,800 tonnes of dry recyclables
- 1,300 tonnes of food waste
- 900 tonnes of green waste

Around 9,000 residents have already taken up the green waste service, with plans to expand it further.

Great Value Services

In December the Cabinet agreed our preliminary draft budget for next year. Although set against another challenging outlook for local government, the preliminary budget seeks to maintain council services without significant cuts next year through prudent financial management.

In the same month the council's external auditors concluded that the council maintains a sound financial position despite the difficult external environment.

Although not as high as in previous months, the numbers of customers currently using 'self help' services at the Gateway remains above our target of 10%, meaning that they get answers more quickly and our staff can work more efficiently.

We have, to date, collected just under 90% of council tax and business rates – slightly higher than the same time last year.

The benefits caseload continues to fall, and more quickly than in the previous quarter. From 10,300 in October, by the end of the year the number had fallen by around 100.

In response to the requirements for 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.

Where the pressures are – The Benefit Caseload

Although the total number of residents claiming benefits is beginning to fall, the council still regularly receives between 200 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 house selling prices (to October) are around 5% more than the same time last year.

Just under 1,500 residents were claiming Job-Seekers Allowance at the end of December. This is just over 22% less than at the same time last year and constitutes around 2% of Ashford's working age population. The Kent average is currently 2.4%.

John Lewis' new 'at home' store opened 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.

December saw the launch of a brand new tourism microsite for Ashford and Tenterden, <http://www.visitashfordandtenterden.co.uk/>, hosted on the award-winning Visit Kent site.