

Overview and Scrutiny
20 May 2014

Agenda item 5

Ashford Borough Council's Performance – Quarter 4, 2013 - 14

The attached report was presented to the Cabinet on 8th May 2014 and O&S are invited to consider it.

Agenda Item No:

Report To **Cabinet**

Date: **8 May 2014**

Report Title: **Ashford Borough Council's Performance – Quarter 4 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 4 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 develop.

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 Alongside a recovering local economy and a strengthening housing market, the Council has ended the year strongly. We

have not only made good progress in achieving our priorities – buying International House and extending the popular PopUp Ashford initiative – but we have also extended our focus to two other important areas. This will make sure that all local partners are working together to achieve the results we all want.

Frontline services are also holding up well against some continued high demand, making sure we run efficiently and effectively. This in turn has allowed us to freeze our part of council tax for the next two years.

Contacts: Nicholas.clayton@ashford.gov.uk – Tel: (01233 330208)

Ashford Borough Council

Our Performance

January to March 2014



Portfolio Holder Neil Shorter

comments on this quarter's report

Alongside a recovering local economy and a strengthening housing market, the Council has ended the year strongly. We have not only made good progress in achieving our priorities – buying International House and extending the popular PopUp Ashford initiative – but we have also extended our focus to two other important areas. This will make sure that all local partners are working together to achieve the results we all want.

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Jobs / Economic Growth

We received over 260 applications from householders to develop their homes – around 20 more than at the same time last year. We decided around 80% within eight weeks, and over 80% of these applications were approved.

We received just under 70 applications from small business and others to develop their properties – around the same as at the same time last year. We decided around half within eight weeks while approving around 80%. This represents good performance compared to other councils.

285,000 people used our car parks. This is around 5,000 less than the previous three months which covered the busy Christmas period. It is also over 10,000 more

than the same period during the last few years.

97% of local food premises comply with safety standards.

Due to the popularity of PopUp Ashford, which helps to create the high street entrepreneurs of the future, it has been extended for the rest of 2014. So far, PopUp Ashford has helped over 20 start-up businesses to test their trade in a town centre location at minimal cost for two to four weeks. Start-ups received mentoring on all aspects of business, and are positive about their experiences.

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 a reduction throughout the year and reflects the proactive homelessness work we began with agreeing our new homelessness strategy agreed during 2013.

What We've Done – Helped businesses understand just how busy the Town Centre is

A footfall counter has been placed on the High Street to provide round-the-clock data and weekly updates to town centre businesses and the Council on how busy the town centre is and how well our Portas Pilot projects are going.

Since January, the average number visitors to the Town Centre has increased from around 65,000 to just under 80,000.

Quality Homes and Places to Live

Almost 100% of council tenants' rent was successfully collected.

In January the council agreed to use government grants and Section 106 money to install five electric charging points throughout the borough, providing the infrastructure necessary to help residents to switch to electric vehicles.

Of those checked in the last three months, 100% of our homes have a gas safety certificate.

In February the Cabinet approved the designation of the Bethersden Neighbourhood Area, enabling the local community to help shape local development and growth through production of a Neighbourhood Development Plan.

Following a useful pilot, in March the Cabinet agreed to a new village 'envelope' for Challock, which will help guide the development of the village in the future.

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 – Added two more priority projects to 'Focus' on

Following agreement to the council's new priorities in October's 'Focus' 2013-15 strategy, In March the Cabinet agreed to add two new projects to the list of priorities which the council will work with partners to achieve over the next two years –

- Improvements at Ashford International Station
- Housing development at Chilmington Green

Great Value Services

In February the Cabinet agreed the Council's budget for next year. Although set against another challenging outlook for local government, the budget seeks to maintain services without significant cuts next year through prudent financial management.

In the same month the Council's external auditors concluded that the council continues to perform well financially overall.

The numbers of customers currently using 'self help' services at the Gateway remains steadily above our target of 10%, meaning that they get answers more quickly and our staff can work more efficiently.

We have collected just under 99% of council tax and business rates – slightly higher than the same time last year.

The benefits caseload continues to fall. From 10,200 in January, by the end of March the number had fallen by around 100.

In March the Cabinet agreed an Armed Forces Community Covenant for the Borough, a voluntary agreement of mutual support between the people of Ashford and its Armed Forces community.

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 – Acted entrepreneurially to pave the way for the Commercial Quarter

In February the Cabinet agreed to buy the International House office space and surrounding area, a key milestone in developing the new Commercial Quarter between the town and the International Station.

The Borough Picture

Average house selling prices (to January) are around 10% more than the same time last year.

Just over 1,450 residents were claiming Job-Seekers Allowance at the end of March. This is around 25% 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%.

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

(source: Office of Rail Regulation)

Hadlow College was named as the preferred provider to secure the future of further education in Ashford.