

Agenda Item No: 4

Report To **Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

Date: **24 November 2015**

Report Title: **Ashford Borough Council's Performance – Quarter 2 2015/16**

Report Author: Policy and Performance Officer, Nicholas Clayton

Portfolio Holder: Portfolio Holder for Finance, Budget & Resource Management, Neil Shorter



ASHFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Summary:

This report seeks to update 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.

The report also includes a 'Technical Annex' of all numerical information included within the report which provides comparison and trend data against performance over the previous four quarters.

Overall, the last three months has seen good progress on a number of the council's key priorities – including the Commercial Quarter, Designer Outlet and Conningbrook Lakes. Service performance remains strong, with steady process rates for planning applications and benefits claims. One crucial positive can be seen in the reformatted approach to customer service, which has led to improved outcomes through an appointments-only system.

Key Decision: NO

Affected Wards: ALL

Recommendations: **The Cabinet is asked to note performance for Quarter 2 2015/16.**

Policy Overview: Previously, the council's strategic direction, which informs the report's content, was held within "Focus 2013-15", the council's corporate plan.

The council agreed a new corporate plan in October 2015, under four priority themes which will be incorporated into future performance reports –

- Enterprising Ashford
- Living Ashford
- Active & Creative Ashford
- Attractive Ashford

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

The last quarter has been one of success and progress against the council's overriding objectives for the borough. Not only have we received exciting plans to redevelop land along Elwick Road in the town centre, and approved a large-scale expansion of the Designer Outlet, but the council's intervention in Park Mall is beginning to bear fruit – with new traders entering and a more welcoming feel being created by the work of our TCAT team and others.

We have reviewed, considered and amended our approach to dealing with face to face enquiries – a change which has already led to significant improvements in the service offered at our Gateways. The speed at which officers deal with other transactions – from planning applications to benefit claims – remains solid.

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Ashford Borough Council

Our Performance

July to September 2015

Introduction from the Portfolio Holder

Neil Shorter, Portfolio Holder for Finance, Budget & Resource Management

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Helping to create jobs and economic growth

An average of 315,000 people visited the town centre per month during the quarter, as calculated by the footfall counter installed on the high street last year. This is an increase of around 5,000 compared to the previous quarter.

Source: Compiled by the Economic Development Team

An average of just over 100,000 people per month used the council's car parks during the quarter. This is similar to the previous quarter.

Source: Compiled by the Parking Services Team

Following public exhibition of the plans in July, the council received an application to develop land along Elwick Road from the leading UK developer Stanhope. Representing in excess of £75 million of private investment into Ashford, the plans include –

- A multi-screen Cinema
- A hotel to support the borough's growing tourist economy
- Restaurant space
- Homes, including private apartments and rental properties
- Attractive public space and landscaping

We received 220 applications from householders to develop their homes over the quarter – around 10 less than the previous quarter. Our latest response rates showed that we decided 92% within eight weeks while approving around 93%.

Source: Compiled by the Planning and Development Service

We received around 80 applications from small business and others to develop their properties over the quarter – around 20 less than the previous quarter. Our latest response rates showed that we decided just over 80% within eight weeks while approving around 85%. This represents stable performance compared to previous months.

Source: Compiled by the Planning and Development Service

The number of residents claiming Job-Seekers Allowance continues to fall, and now stands at around 800¹. This is around 30% less than at the same time last year and constitutes around 1.1% of Ashford's working age population. Ashford is below the Kent average, currently at 1.3%. The number of young people (18-24) claiming JSA long-term (over 12 months) remains steady at 30.

Just over 100 claimants a month either returned to work or increasing their employment hours, whilst the circumstances of around 5 per month meant a switch to another type of benefit.

Source: NOMIS

In September 2015 the council announced that it had triggered the delivery of the first new office building in the Commercial Quarter with developers Quinn Estates Ltd and George Wilson Holdings Ltd.

In September Cabinet received a review of the current situation regarding development in the town centre, and endorsed an approach to help deliver key private sector investments in this area.

Source: Cabinet 10/09/15 minute 124

In September the Planning Committee approved plans to expand the Ashford Designer Outlet. The 100,000 sq ft extension will add nearly 40 new stores, six restaurants and cafes as well as creating up to an additional 700 jobs – building on the existing 90 stores which already attract nearly three million visitors a year.

Source: Planning Committee 23/09/2015, Application number [14/01402/AS](#)

¹ As part of the Government's reorganisation of the welfare system, Universal Credit (UC) continues to be rolled out across the country, replacing a number of means tested benefits, including Jobseekers Allowance (JSA). UC rollout in Ashford began in April, meaning that JSA figures no longer include those now on UC. As not all UC claimants will be in work, it is probable that JSA claimant numbers now underestimate unemployment. The Office for National Statistics is working with the Department for Work and Pensions to produce an agreed method for separating out unemployed and inactive UC claimants to give a more accurate estimate of local unemployment – due to be updated for local data in early 2017.

Creating quality homes & places to live

The average selling price of homes in Ashford (to July) was around 4% more than at the same time last year.

Source: Home.co.uk

The building of 120 new homes was started during quarter 1, an increase of 20 on the previous three months – with the vast majority of these coming from private enterprises. The number of homes completed also remained steady at around 80. (*Quarter 2 figures yet to be released by DCLG*)

Source: Department for Communities and Local Government)

100% of council-owned properties had a current gas safety certificate at the end of the quarter, a number comparable with both last quarter's and last year's performance.

Source: Compiled by the Community and Housing Service

In September Cabinet received a review of the Allotment service, carried out between May and July 2015. It approved a number of changes, aimed at ensuring that the council's approach to allotment provision remains fair and cost neutral.

Source: Cabinet 10/09/15 minute 119

The average number of families requiring temporary Bed and Breakfast accommodation during the quarter rose slightly to just under 15 a month. The number of homeless applications remains at around 40 per quarter (with just over half of these being accepted).

Source: Compiled by the Community and Housing Service

Ashford's newest country park, Conningbrook Lakes, held a family open day in September. This gave the local community a fantastic opportunity to try out the exciting range of activities which will be available across the site – including canoeing, paddle-boarding, rowing and water zorbing. The day also saw the unveiling of a plaque at the Black Poplar tree planted earlier in the year to mark the 800th anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta.

In July the Planning Committee granted (subject to a legal agreement and request for additional information) for the erection of 83 new dwellings on the Godinton Way Industrial Estate.

Source: Planning Committee 01/07/2015, Application number [14/01305/AS](#)



Giving residents value for money services

Our Customer Service Agents at the Gateway +, Civic Centre and elsewhere dealt with an average of just over 7,000 visitors per month – the same as in the previous quarter. A fully appointment-only service now runs five days a week, a change which is working really well – with the need for face to face appointments reducing and the numbers using our ‘fast track’ service increasing. This has meant that overall wait times have also improved, with just under 99% of face-to-face queries seen within our target of 15 minutes.

The proportion of customers using ‘self-service’ provision is increasing slightly to around 20% each month, and it remains above our target of 10% - meaning that customers didn’t need to speak to a member of staff and freeing up officers to deal with more complex queries.

Source: Compiled by the Customer Services Team

By the end of September we had collected around 60% of council tax and business rates, around the same as at this point last year.

Around 67% of residents chose to use direct debit for paying council tax, a figure which remains broadly constant compared to last year.

Source: Compiled by the Revenues and Benefits Team

The benefits caseload has fallen to around 9,700 throughout the quarter. This in turn has meant that the average time taken to process new claims and changes in circumstances has levelled-out at around 5 days.

Source: Compiled by the Revenues and Benefits Team

In September Cabinet received a progress report on the implementation of the Customer Service Strategy (approved in December 2014), and agreed the relocation of face to face services.

Source: Cabinet 10/09/15 minute 123

The percentage of sundry debtor income received – small payments from residents who don't usually interact with the council (parking fines, pest control services etc) - averaged around 85%, slightly less than the previous quarter.

Source: Compiled by the Revenues and Benefits Team

Working with colleagues from Kent County Council's occupational health, we completed around 65 disabled adaptations - from grab rails to flush floor showers - to private and public sector homes during the last three months. This is slightly higher than during the previous quarter, and comparable to the same time last year.

Source: Compiled by Community and Housing Services

In September the Audit Committee received an update on progress in reviewing the council's risk management processes, and agreed a new set of parameters and criteria for assessing risk in a balanced manner whilst making sure the organisation is not risk averse.

Source: Audit Committee 29/09/15 minute 150

In September Cabinet endorsed an Ashford Borough Council / Kent County Council Delivery Deal. This deal offers a short, clear statement of the two councils' shared commitment to work together to deliver the council's key priorities and better quality outcomes – including the 'Big 8' projects and future service improvements.

Source: Cabinet 10/09/15 minute 120

97.2% of food premises comply with environmental health standards. The council has maintained its effort in this area, with a continued focus and resources. The percentage has remained steady over the last year. Any food premises found to be non-compliant either receive a formal letter or a revisit, and officers always seek to work with the premises in the first instance. If non-compliance is severe, or does not improve after these initial interventions, officers would then serve a notice. However, during this period no notices were served.

Source: Compiled by the Environmental Health Team

Technical Annex

Indicator	Quarter 2 2015/16	Quarter 1 2015/16	Quarter 4 2014/15	Quarter 3 2014/15	Quarter 2 2014/15
Helping to create jobs and economic growth					
Average Town Centre footfall per month	316,600	310,000	300,000	282,484	263,500
Average car park users per month	101,950	99,650	98,600	101,000	101,000
% of compliant food premises	97	97	98	98	97
Householder planning applications - number	218	234	215	253	270
Householder planning applications - % decided within 8 weeks	92	88	84	82	86
Householder planning applications - % approved	93	93	98	90	95
Small business planning applications - number	82	97	83	90	110
Small business planning applications – % decided within 8 weeks	80	80	57	70	69
Small business planning applications – % approved	84	84	79	85	90
JSA claimants	790	850	1,070	980	1,060
Long-term (over 12 months) JSA claimants 18-24	30	30	30	35	45
Creating quality homes and places to live					
Average house selling price	226,827	215,340	217,500	229,000	209,000
Number of homes started	---	120	100	80	170
Number of homes completed	---	80	80	80	50
% of properties with a current gas safety certificate	100	100	100	100	100
Average number of families in B&B accommodation per month	15	10	14	5	15
Number of homeless applications received	---	38	65	45	60
Number of homeless applications approved	---	23	40	45	35
Value for money services					
Average number of face-to-face contacts per month	7,110	7,060	11,099	8,253	9,977
% of customers seen within 15 minutes	99	94	93	94	93.6
% of customers using 'self service'	20	16.7	19.2	17.8	16.7
% Council Tax collected	58.5	30.5	98.5	86.8	58.7
% Business rates collected	60.2	33.2	98.5	86	58.5
% take up of direct debit for paying council tax	67.1	67.1	66.7	66.6	67.1
Benefits Caseload	9,700	9,800	9,900	9,860	10,000
Number of days to process new benefit claims / CoC	5.75	5.5	4.8	5.6	5.5
% sundry debtor income	84	89	92	94.6	96
Number of disabled adaptations completed	65	50	65	68	78