



Ashford
Borough Council



Annual Performance Report 2019-2020

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Message from the Leader

Welcome to the final Annual Report of our Corporate Plan 2015-2020, which reflects on the achievements and milestones seen across our borough over the last year.

With the opening of the Curious Brewery; The Coachworks; the arrival of the new tenants at Elwick Place; the Designer Outlet expansion; the opening of a modernised Danemore and Junction 10A, to name only a few of the exciting changes to have happened in the last year, it is clear Ashford is a borough we all should be proud to call home.

Whilst the coronavirus is a setback to our economic and social journey and although priorities will need reassessing, it is clear from the way the community has rallied that we will come through, we will reconnect with family and friends, we will rebuild our economy and we will be a thriving community once again.



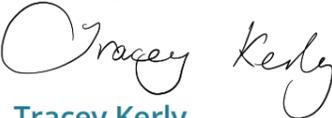

Gerry Clarkson, CBE
Leader, Ashford
Borough Council

Message from the Chief Executive

I hope that you enjoy reading our Annual Report – it offers just a snapshot of some of the good work which has gone on over the last year as well as some key milestones that have been reached across the Corporate Plan period.

With our entrepreneurial approach, careful planning and collective working our services have remained first-rate whilst ensuring our contribution to your Council Tax can remain low. The year has seen some fantastic achievements with the modernisation of Danemore, our continued commitment to reducing homelessness with schemes like our Christchurch Lodge project, and town centre and cultural events such as the Illuminates and Create festival.

With the end of the period came the first weeks of the coronavirus pandemic and I want to offer my condolences to all of you who have lost loved ones. Whilst we will need time to reflect and assess how our services may need to adapt, it is clear that our communities are strong and closer than ever.



Tracey Kerly
Chief Executive,
Ashford Borough Council



KEY FACTS AND FIGURES

- Office for National Statistics Mid Year 2019
- KCC Housing Led forecast (Nov 2019), Strategic Commissioning - Analytics, Kent County Council
- Office for National Statistics
- Office for National Statistics
- Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings - resident analysis 2019
- Annual Population Survey
- 2019 Mid Year Population Estimates, Office for National Statistics
- Office of Rail and Road

Size



130,000
Population estimate



2.2
People per hectare



58,062
Hectares largest geographical area in Kent



153,000
Population estimate by 2030

39

Ward areas

49

parish areas

Health



80.6
Life expectancy at birth – male



84.2
Life expectancy at birth – female



Economy



£609.10

Median Weekly Resident Earnings, 2019

(higher than the Great British average slightly lower than the Kent average)

28.9%

NVQ4+ level qualification or above placing Ashford in the bottom 20% of authorities in England.



Diversity

40.7yrs

Mean age



25.1%

Proportion of population 19 and under



19.4%

Proportion of population aged 65 and over



Transport



4,102,872

trips Ashford International Station

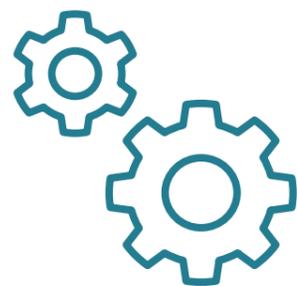


200,000

increase on the previous year



CORPORATE PLAN 2015-2020



CORPORATE PLAN 2015-2020

The council's current Corporate Plan is now approaching its conclusion. Over the last five years we have prioritised our actions based upon the five priorities detailed below, with an aspiration to make Ashford borough an attractive place where people and businesses want to settle.

ENTERPRISING ASHFORD

Promote growth and achieve greater economic prosperity for Ashford borough. We will work to secure inward investment to create a wide range of jobs carried out by a highly skilled workforce.

- A vibrant town centre and a supporting business centre.
- A range of jobs with an emphasis on increasing skills levels.
- Creating a new local plan that provides for economic growth by allocating sufficient space for new businesses and encourages a range of jobs, especially higher skilled jobs.
- Well-planned and well-resourced infrastructure to maintain Ashford's prime location status.
- A thriving rural tourism economy and successful rural enterprise.

LIVING ASHFORD

Secure quality homes across the borough, catering for a range of ages, tenures and need, in well planned and attractive new places.

- Identify an adequate supply of housing to meet the range of housing needs.
- Create a supply of town centre housing to suit emerging new markets.
- Help people meet their housing needs and aspirations.
- Maintain assurance of confidence in the planning system.



CURIOUS BREWERY

ACTIVE AND CREATIVE ASHFORD

Provide or enable a range of quality leisure and cultural activities where people can make healthy and affordable lifestyle choices and enjoy assets that create attractive, desirable and active communities.

- Delivery of the best mix of sports, cultural, recreational experiences supporting a range of health and wellbeing benefits for residents of all ages and abilities.
- Innovative ways for people to choose active lifestyles.
- Grow our cultural offer to be a successful and alternative destination.
- Maximise the value of our key green sites.

ATTRACTIVE ASHFORD

Achieve an environment that creates higher standards of public space design, alongside improved standards of presentation of key green spaces. Safeguard and conserve our local heritage and areas of outstanding landscape quality to ensure the very best attractive environment with thriving and vibrant town centres.

- Improve and safeguard the quality and presentation of the borough, recognising its unique environment, countryside, local heritage and tourism offer.
- Delivery of best mix of new and existing parks and green spaces, incorporating quality public art and cutting edge design.
- Strengthen tourism and local heritage offer.

OUR UNDERPINNING PRINCIPLES

Remain a well-resourced council, with effective governance, high quality services, good communications, safe surroundings, demonstrating good compliance and high standards.

CORPORATE PLAN HIGHLIGHTS



Dec 2015 **Elwick Place plans approved**

Multi-million pound plans approved to provide Ashford with a town centre boutique cinema, family hotel and restaurants and cafes. **Opened in December 2018.**

Jun 2016 **Local Plan to 2030 consultation opened**

The plan set out the land that needs to be provided in the borough to accommodate new homes and jobs up to 2030. **Adopted in February 2019.**

Jul 2016 **Funding support agreed for new college**

The Cabinet agreed recommendations including providing additional funding support, helping delivery of the new campus to come forward sooner. **Opened September 2017.**

Aug 2016 **Consultation on plans for Ashford's new M20 10a Junction**

Plans to build a new junction on the M20 went to consultation following the acceptance of the application by the Planning Inspectorate. **Opened to traffic October 2019.**

July 2016 **Ashford Commercial Quarter**

Cabinet approved planning for this significant commercial development. The re-generation will attract important inward investments and generate jobs for the area. **Opened July 2018.**

Feb 2017 **Work begins at Danemore, Tenterden**

Works commenced on the construction of 34 sheltered scheme apartments for local residents and 4 bungalows for private sale. **Opened April 2019.**

Feb 2017
'One You', the new health shop comes to Ashford; following its success, moved to larger premises in July 2019.

Nov 2018 **Snowdogs discover Ashford**

Inspired by the much-loved animated film The Snowman and The Snowdog, Ashford's Snowdog trail celebrated the film's themes of life, love, loss, friendship, companionship, strength and kindness.

Apr 2018 **Designer Outlet expansion**

£90m Designer Outlet expansion drives long term growth. **Opened November 2019.**

Apr 2018 **'Ashford For You' magazine launches**

The 24 page, quarterly magazine is distributed to all households in the borough and covers what's going on in the local area, profiling services, people and places.

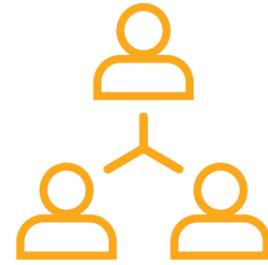
Jul 2018 **The Coachworks vision outlined**

The council commissioned Carl Turner Architects to create a vision to breathe new life into disused industrial buildings in Dover Place, close to the international train station. **Opened in stages during 2019.**

Oct 2018 **Beacon unveiled**

As part of commemorations throughout 2018 for the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Armistice at the end of the First World War, a brand new Civic Beacon was unveiled – the first of its kind for Ashford town.

ENTERPRISING ASHFORD



Following the opening of the anchor tenants of the Picturehouse Cinema and Travelodge Hotel at our Elwick Place site in December 2018, this year has seen the announcement and opening of a number of new tenants including award-winning Kentish independent food and drink brand Macknade and Dansaki, an Afro-Caribbean restaurant which is set to open imminently under the Travelodge hotel offering a fine dining experience in a cosy and welcoming atmosphere.

In October, The Ashford International Model Railway Exhibition Centre set up temporary home in unit 2 to showcase its plans to create a permanent visitor attraction in the town and, in January, Snap Fitness, one of the world's fastest growing gym and fitness club franchises, opened in unit 8, which is located on the first floor of the cinema, restaurant and leisure development.

Guy Hollaway Architects' design for Elwick Place was also selected as a finalist in the 'Retail and Leisure Architect of the Year' category at the 2019 Building Design Architect of the Year Awards.

The year has seen key developments in our town centre's offer, with the opening of the Curious Brewery in a town centre position directly opposite the train station. A brand new, state of the art, multi-million pound cathedral of brewing with a bar, first class

restaurant and inspired landscaping. The Curious Brewery opened its doors in May providing a fantastic addition to the town centre offer and providing an additional employer to the town.

The year also saw the phased opening of The Coachworks developed by Turner Works. The Coachworks, a 'meanwhile' development, revived a disused industrial building in Dover Place which has added further vitality to our commercial quarter. Turner Works have developed an imaginative and innovative concept for us, unlike anything else in Kent, using the existing fabric of the buildings they have created: The Yard Bar, an outdoors entertainment space; The Platform, a new shared office space in the old corn store; and the Hot House, which provides room for food stalls and event space.

Strategic property investment in the town continued during the year, with our acquisition of the Matalan site with the aim of securing a commercial income; and the acquisition of the Home Plus site for redevelopment by our property company, A Better Choice for Property Ltd.

We have long campaigned for the delivery of extra road transport capacity to cater for the town's future needs. This year has seen the opening of Junction 10a, maintaining our borough as one the best connected in the area.

The year has seen key developments in our town centre's offer, with the opening of the Curious Brewery in a town centre position directly opposite the train station.



The junction will support the local economy and improve the infrastructure of the town.

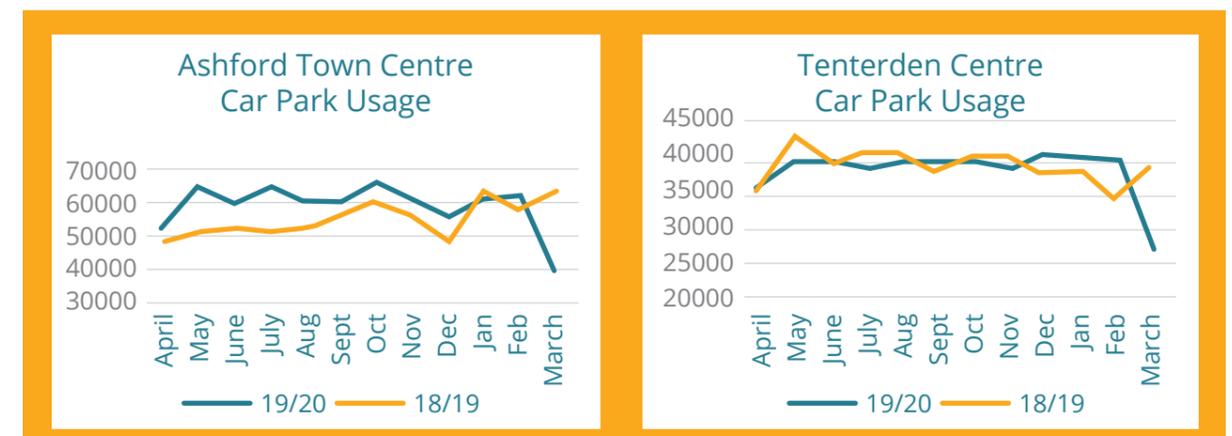
Whilst our town centres, like most across the country, are going through a period of change, with every retail loss being unfortunate, we are committed to supporting our town centres: the hearts of our communities.

Occupancy rates in our Park Mall shopping centre have remained high throughout the year with an average of between 2-3 units out of 32 being vacant at any one time. We offer ongoing support to traders in Park Mall which has seen footfall in the shopping centre grow steadily since it was acquired by the council.

We ran a series of events throughout the year in the town centre to help boost footfall and this year these have included The 'Great British Bark Off', The 'Day of the Dead' Halloween Spooktacular and the 'Illuminates' events.

With our emerging ideas for the former Mecca Bingo site, it is hoped we will be able to revitalise the town centre ensuring our town remains an attractive and safe place to live and visit, where people feel welcome and have a sense of community and belonging.

Car park usage in Ashford town centre has performed well across the year, consistently returning a higher usage figure across the year compared to the previous year. The introduction of social distancing measures at the end of March has significantly reduced car park usage and this will continue into the following months. Over the coming year automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) technology will be introduced to Elwick Place car park to make it easier to use. Our Tenterden car parks have seen a comparable usage to the previous year.



LIVING ASHFORD

During the year, Danemore sheltered housing scheme in Tenterden re-opened, marking a major landmark in the multi-million pound modernisation plans for our sheltered housing schemes. The new look Danemore provides 34 homes for affordable rent for older people, together with four chalet bungalows to be sold on the open market.

Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal officially opened Danemore in February.

Five years after we launched the innovative Christchurch House project that has succeeded in benefitting homeless households and saved local taxpayers money, this year we have unveiled plans following the same blueprint for Christchurch Lodge.

Hoping to open in the autumn Christchurch Lodge a former disused home in Beaver Road is to be converted into eight homes, capable of accommodating up to 25 people. An extensive refurbishment programme is underway to add facilities like a communal kitchen, dining room and laundry room.

Following the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act we have seen an increase in homelessness approaches to us and the number of homelessness preventions has risen significantly. As such, we have had to respond proactively and schemes such as Christchurch House and Lodge are a crucial element of this.

Also during the year, our work to welcome Syrian refugees was nationally recognised. Our proud record of welcoming more vulnerable families from war-torn Syria than any other district in Kent, and indeed across the South East outside of London, has been recognised in the annual LGC Awards 2020 nominated in the Diversity and Inclusion category.

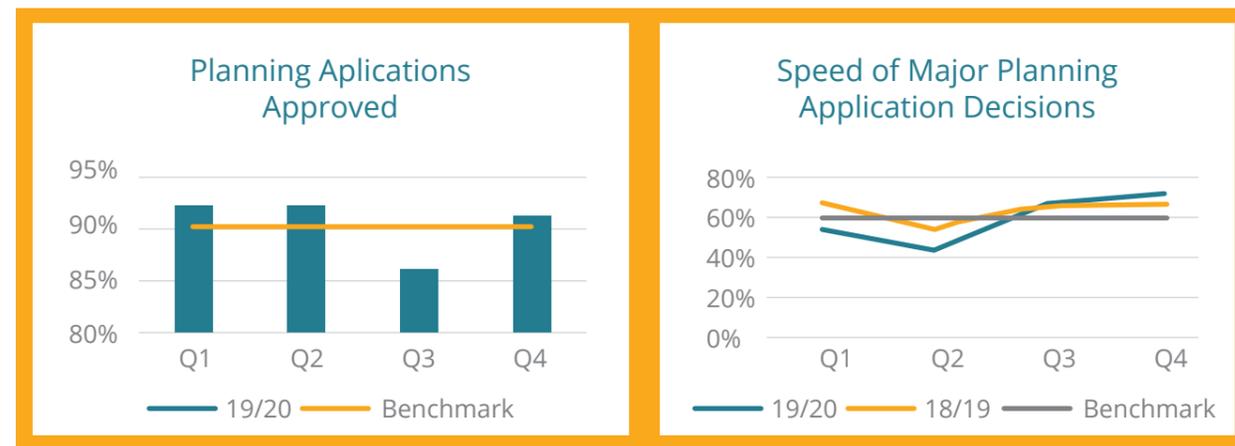
Our New Build Affordable Homes Programme 2018-2022 seeks to continue the modernisation of existing sheltered housing schemes and brings forward the delivery of new affordable housing within the borough, whilst continuing the council's existing programme of street purchases and buying back ex-council house properties where appropriate. 15 new build affordable houses were delivered by Ashford Borough Council in 2019/20 with more planned. We purchased 41 on-street properties in 2019/20 to bolster the resilience of its housing stock and continued to work with registered providers of social housing, who delivered 143 affordable rented and shared ownership properties in 2019/20.

During the year, over £1.05m was spent by us on disabled facilities grants across 70 properties making lives easier and, in many cases, allowing our residents to continue to live comfortably in their homes.



Following the adoption of our Local Plan 2030 in February 2019 which sets out the strategic priorities for development in the borough, work is either ongoing or has concluded on neighbourhood plans for: Bethersden, Boughton Aluph and

Eastwell, Charing, Pluckley, Rolvenden, Smarden, Tenterden and Wye, helping local communities to influence the planning of the area in which they live and work.



We will always work with planning applicants to ensure a satisfactory outcome is reached when planning applications are submitted; planning application approvals remained relatively consistent at around the benchmark figure of 90% throughout 2019/20.

We are, however, aware that due to fluctuating caseloads and vacancy levels in the planning department our performance against the government's target for the speed of major planning applications decisions has, at times throughout the year, fallen below our expectations. The performance threshold for speed of major decisions is set at 60% over a rolling 24 month period ending Q2 each year. In Q2 2019/20 performance for major speed was 65.5%. However, this fell to 60% in Q4. Our focus over the coming year will be this performance measure to ensure it is improved.

ACTIVE AND CREATIVE ASHFORD



During the year we provided funding to enable the Ashford One You shop to relocate to a larger unit within Park Mall. Since opening in February 2017, the One You shop has provided support to Ashford communities in tackling their health and wellbeing concerns, with more than 4,000 people having visited the One You shop to date.

July also saw the launch of the 'Woodchurch Wagon', a 16-seater minibus; the second vehicle in a wellbeing initiative created by Ashford Borough Council and named 'Community Connect'.

Woodchurch parish councillors have been working, in partnership with us, to arrange the provision of the service. The vehicle was named by children from Woodchurch Primary School.

July saw the return of Create Festival, already one of the South East's biggest and longest established free music festivals. This year marked the 24th year of the festival and was headlined by iconic Britpop band The Lightning Seeds.

The Great British Bark Off provided residents and visitors to the town with a fun, free family event.

Hosted by Loveashford in partnership with Emergency Exit Arts, the Great British Bark Off combined a dog show with a Great British Bake Off inspired cake competition for local businesses.

Over 30 dogs were entered into the show, which had four categories: best owner-dog relationship, most unusual talent, best story and best celebrity look-a-like.



December saw a series of events under the Illuminites banner. A five minute digital display was projected on the side of International House, celebrating Ashford's rich heritage and history with a festive twist. This event coincided with the opening of the Coachworks in Dover Place.

For two nights Ashford also became a Winter Forest, made up of a trail of illuminated trees dotted around the town centre and Elwick Place. The trees were Ashford-themed, showcasing the town's rich history, famous landmarks, and illustrious residents for a striking installation.

The following weekend, the Carnival of the Baubles filled the town. Starting at Elwick Place, a procession of giant, illuminated baubles, decorated by children from six Ashford primary schools made its way down Bank Street to the Lower High Street.

August saw Ashford celebrate the 100th anniversary of the presentation of our iconic Mark IV. We are so fortunate to have this incredibly unique and rare artefact, monument and memorial; it's important to celebrate its history and continue to tell the story of why it's here, and what it represents.

ATTRACTIVE ASHFORD



July saw cabinet approval of a draft masterplan for Conningbrook Lakes Country Park which will provide a mix of recreational facilities for residents and visitors alike to enjoy while protecting the rich natural environment.

We have been awarded more than £3 million from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund to revitalise Victoria Park.

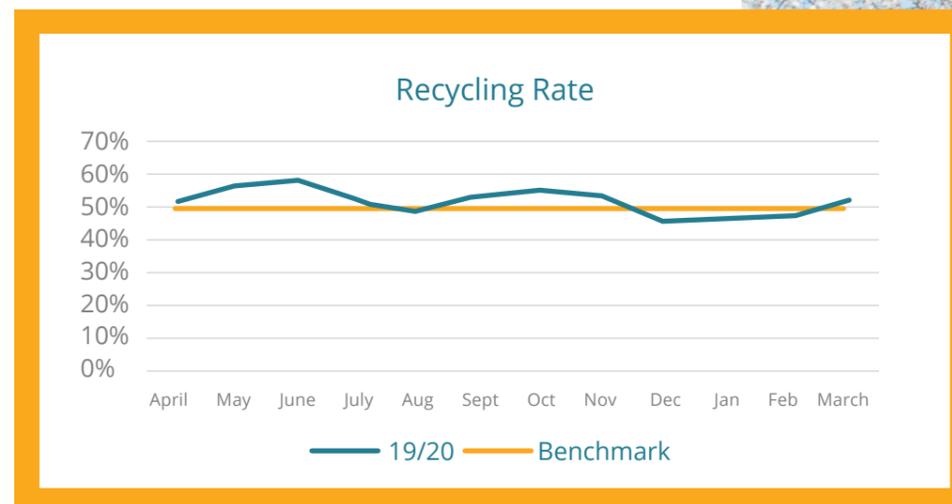
The funding means we can deliver our exciting plans to redevelop and restore one of Ashford's oldest and most-loved green spaces, working with the local community, volunteer groups and the Friends of Victoria Park.

Proposals include a new children's play area, improvements to the river, improved lighting across the park, and a new community hub building with café, and new toilets. The iconic Grade II Listed Hubert Fountain and the surrounding piazza area will also be restored and repaired.

We have continued our strong recycling performance, maintaining our position as the top recycling authority in Kent in 2018/19, with a percentage of household waste sent for reuse, recycling or composting figure of 53.4%.

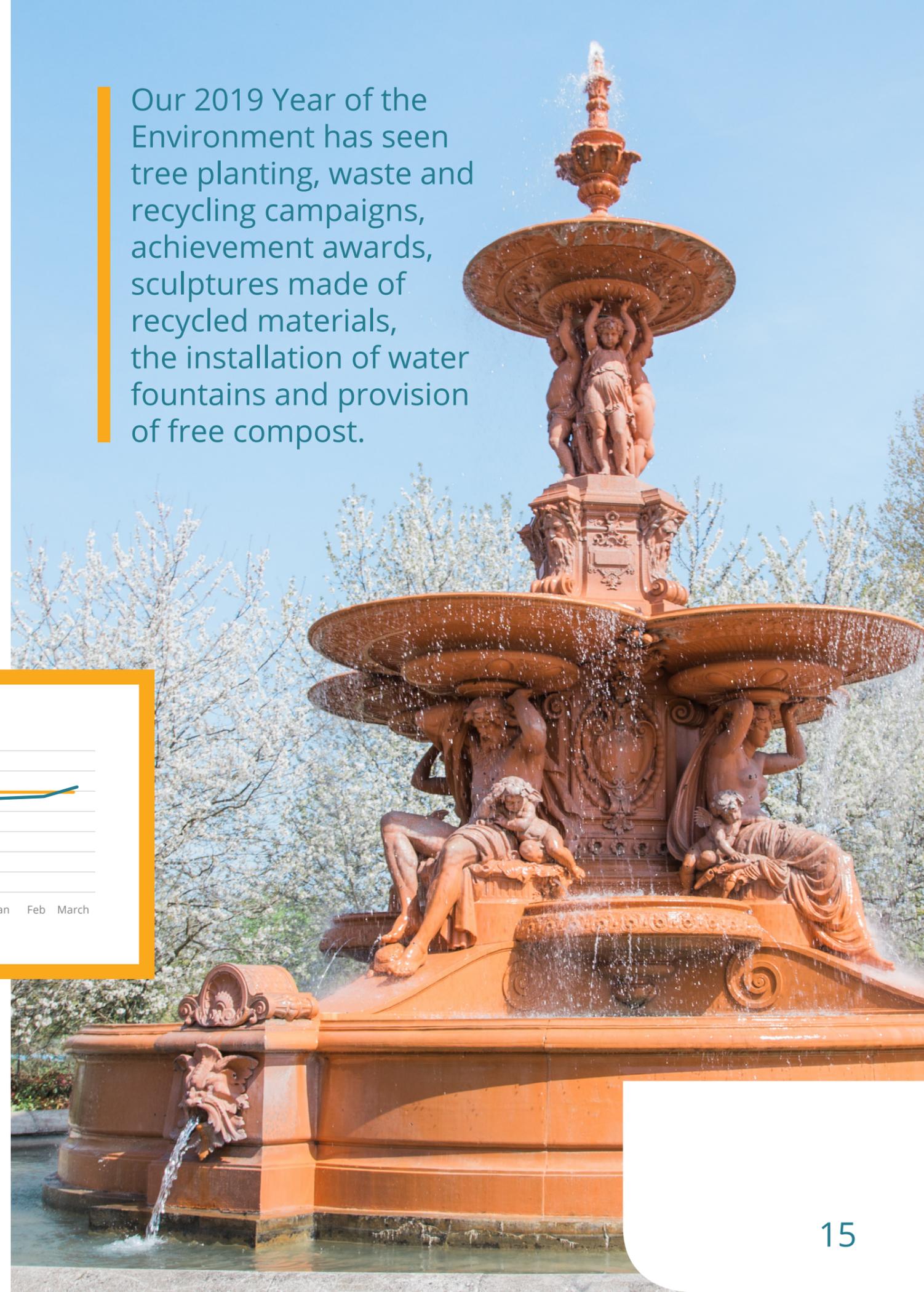
This performance continues into 2019/20 as shown. Focused education and awareness campaigns led by the council's Environment and Land Management service have helped residents to increase the amount of waste recycled and minimise contamination.

The success rate for refuse collections has remained high throughout 2019/20, with 99.97% of refuse collections per 100,000 collections made being successful across the year.



Our 2019 Year of the Environment has seen tree planting, waste and recycling campaigns, achievement awards, sculptures made of recycled materials, the installation of water fountains, provision of free compost as well as pumpkin and Christmas tree recycling campaigns.

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OUR UNDERPINNING PRINCIPLES

At July's meeting of Council, it was announced that a key element of the council's new five year corporate plan would be a stride towards carbon neutrality with an aspiration for the council to be 80% carbon neutral by the end of that corporate plan 2025, and to be completely carbon neutral by the end of 2030.

As part of our aim to providing proactive, useful, relevant and accessible communications, we have continued the publication of our quarterly magazine 'Ashford for You' distributed to all households in the borough covering events, services, people and places. The magazine continues to be well received by residents and supports our communications output.

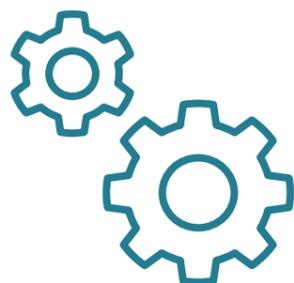
Transparency in all we do remains one of our key underlying principles as well as publishing as much information as we can on our transparency pages during the year we received 915 Freedom of Information requests responding to 97% of these within the statutory 20 working day time limit.

We continue to welcome the government's requirement for large organisations to be more transparent on gender pay, and will use this opportunity to nurture our culture of supporting women in the workplace, ensuring

success is defined by talent, not gender or circumstance. As of the 31 March 2019 our mean (average) gender pay gap in hourly pay stands at 13.5% with a median (mid-point) gender pay gap in hourly pay at 22.4%.

We continue to deliver our digital delivery programme which has the aims of both improving the customer experience and realising capacity to ensure a sustainable council for the future.

With the introduction of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines which came into force in September 2019, our website has undergone a transformation to be accessible to all members of the public. Some work includes editing the wording of the website content and converting documents to formats so that they can be accessed by all users. The council's accessibility score has increased from 60% to 98% as of February 2019 as a result of this work. Furthermore, the launch of our 'Your Ashford' app has enabled access to just under 80 different services from the convenience of a mobile app.



RESIDENTS SURVEY

In 2018, we asked residents to share their views on life in Ashford and their opinions on the council and its service. We used these to shape our future plans and work to improve our services.

In January and February 2020 we have conducted a similar survey based on the same methodology.

We will use the results to develop new strategies to further improve the services we deliver to residents and shape our new Corporate Plan and Carbon Neutral Strategy.

Although the results are still being analysed we are able to share some of our preliminary findings.



Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your local area as a place to live?



Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way Ashford Borough Council runs its services?



To what extent do you think Ashford Borough Council understands the needs of customers?



To what extent do you agree you can influence the decisions that Ashford Borough Council makes?



How satisfied are you with parks in the borough?



How satisfied are you with bin collection?



How satisfied are you with council car parks?



THE FUTURE



Emerging Corporate Plan, Covid-19 and Recovery

When we embarked on developing our new corporate plan in the autumn of 2019 it couldn't be envisaged that we would be in the throes of a global pandemic in the spring of 2020. We will need to take time to reflect on the effect the coronavirus pandemic has had on all of our lives and the provision of our services before considering our Corporate Plan for the future.

The work that had commenced on the new corporate plan highlighted a strong desire to focus our efforts on enabling all our communities to be places to be proud to live in, to strengthen their resilience and ensure everyone has the opportunity to realise their own goals and aspirations.

It is important that we do not lose sight of where we want to be and how we can work together to ensure we can achieve our goals and aspirations for the future. In setting our priorities for the next corporate plan we sought the views of many organisations to agree a long term vision for the borough. This vision is supported by having a strong local economy, a flourishing natural environment and a range of cultural and leisure offerings that appeal to everyone.

At a time when we have had to take a look at what is important to us, caring for each other and valuing what we have and what others do to support us in our daily

lives, strengthens our resolve to ensure we strive to deliver our vision.

Since the Autumn of 2019 we have been working with a wide range of stakeholders to develop our long-term aspirations for the borough. This work was nearing completion as the coronavirus epidemic became widespread in the UK. Immediately, our attention and resources focused on supporting vulnerable people, maintaining vital community services and assisting local businesses.

In the short to medium term we will work towards a Recovery Plan that sets out steps that we can take to support our economy, local communities and residents, to recuperate from the wide ranging impacts of the coronavirus and to build back better, rather than purely seek a return to, the pre-pandemic normal.

As we recover from the effects of the global pandemic, it is important to have in place a strategic plan to ensure we have a clear view of what needs to be done to continue to support recovery, strengthen resilience, and promote a prosperous and more inclusive future.

As we emerge from the recovery phase, a delivery plan will be developed to set out how we will achieve this long term aspiration.



Ashford Borough Council is committed to being open and transparent and we follow the code of recommended practice for local authorities on data transparency. As well as our performance reports we produce a number of monitoring reports which are made available on our webpages including:

- Annual Governance Statement
- Statement of accounts and Budget books
- Quarterly Financial monitoring report
- Medium term financial monitoring report
- Housing current delivery reports
- Planning updates and many more.