

Agenda Item No: 14
Report To: Council
Date of Meeting: 22nd December 2022



Report Title: **A Decade of Challenges, Opportunities and Change**

Report Author: Cllr Gerry Clarkson
Job Title: Executive Leader of the Council

Summary: This report is a final synopsis and review of the challenges, opportunities and changes that have occurred leading into and during the tenure of office of the Executive Leader of the Council which, by May 2023 will have spanned over a decade.

Members of the Council are asked to particularly reflect on the quite unusual national and international background to what has been achieved. We have had the demise of both the South East England Development Agency and the Ashford Future Company. The Referendum that resulted in a vote to leave the European Union, a worldwide Pandemic that sadly caused the death of so many and brought about significant economic and social disruption. We have the climate change issues, including the Stodmarsh situation. Then more recently we have the tragic invasion of Ukraine and the sorrow for the people there and the continuing armed conflict which is greatly impacting on world markets.

The Members are asked to receive and note this report and to reflect upon this past decade in the life and activities of our Borough Council on behalf of those we serve.

Key Decision: NO

Significantly Affected Wards: Borough Wide

Recommendations: **The Council is recommended to receive the report and note the contents.**

Background Papers: N.A

Contact: gerry.clarkson@ashford.gov.uk

A Decade of Challenges, Opportunities and Change

Introduction

1. As Members will know I shall not be standing again at the May 2023 elections and had intended to stand down as Leader at the end of this year. This formal Report from me, was therefore planned for this Full Council meeting, which was to be my last as Council Leader. However, my Conservative colleagues have prevailed upon me to remain as the Executive Leader until the elections in May 2023, and I have agreed to do so.
2. Clearly when we return after the Christmas break, there will only be one further Council meeting in early March, which would be very close indeed to the Pre-Election Period as prescribed in law, and in my considered opinion it would be inappropriate to present this report at that time. That is why this Report, recording the challenges, opportunities and change over the last decade, with which many members will have been much engaged, is being tabled at this time.
3. As you all know I am quite passionate about our delightful Borough right here in the Garden of England. We have our urban town of Ashford and our delightful rural town of Tenterden, both are surrounded by necklaces of charming rural villages. This report will however, concentrate on a fairly condensed synopsis and review of the challenges, opportunities and changes that have occurred leading into and during the tenure of office of the Executive Leader of the Council which, by May 2023 will have spanned over a decade. There is quite a lot to cover.

Background to the Core Challenges

4. The "Ashford Future" Company, under the stewardship of Judith Armitt, was created in 2008 just two years after my election to Council. Its objective was to assist Ashford with economic growth. Unfortunately, very little progress was made and when its main partner the "South East England Development Agency" (SEEDA), was abolished in 2012 its fate was sealed. A year later, on the 11th February 2014, the "Ashford Future Company" was dissolved.
5. There was now a serious vacuum in terms of our economic progress, but it was also a very real opportunity for us to step in and drive the Ashford economy forward at pace. We needed to set up a structure, to facilitate and accelerate the economic transformation of our Borough.
6. Ashford had a number of sites earmarked for development, namely the Ashford FE & HE College "SITE" - the Commercial Quarter "SITE" - the Old Cattle Market "SITE" and the Town Centre "SITE" at Vicarage Lane ". All dormant for years - now clearly time for change.
7. The Homes and Community Agency, (now Homes England), was holding most of the land intended for the regeneration of urban Ashford, but delivery on the sites had been extremely slow. This was a real barrier to the economic growth of

Ashford and we now needed to intervene if we were to make progress in the economic transformation of our Borough.

8. We needed to build upon our excellent connectivity with the introduction of the High Speed 1 network coming into operation in 2007 at a cost some £5.8 Billion. With services from our new International Station to London in just 38 minutes and linking us directly to the continent, with Paris being but just over two hours away. The Channel Tunnel that opened much earlier in May 1994 and was now well used, as was our good road network with the M20 and A20. I have always maintained that we are the most International District in the UK. This has been re-enforced more recently by our 2022, participation in the French Presidential Elections and a few weeks later with the French Legislative Elections.
9. We need to bear in mind that throughout this last decade we have always worked to a sound Five Year Corporate Plan, which sets out and reviews our priorities, to achieve the ambition for the Borough that we developed in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders. Although we had to pause the immediate progression of this work, to respond to the coronavirus pandemic, we didn't lose sight of our long term objectives to be a greener, more caring and prosperous Borough for everyone.
10. The financial acumen of our professional officers has also been of a high order, and that has sustained us as we have navigated the challenges of the last decade. We have a strong financial core and sound reserves, but there is always the need to be vigilant.
11. Kent County Council clearly has its much larger range of responsibilities and given the financial pressures they face, does mean that it impacts on the District Councils. This was particularly true in terms of certain land management duties, including the highways in our own Borough. We needed to work closely with the County Council to really gain effective meaningful change.
12. The voluntary sector have so much to give and can greatly assist our Council. We should never forget that we are blessed with having the Ashford Volunteer Centre right in the very heart of our Urban Town of Ashford and they provide such a varied range of services. They been charged by KCC with assisting in co-ordinating the volunteer sector across the districts, which is an extension of the co-ordinating role they have in Ashford.
13. There was a lack of Civic Pride, which was odd given our rich history and heritage and whilst it was pleasing that the Grade I listed Church of St. Mary The Virgin had been "Re-ordered" in 2011, to provide a performance space, there still remained a lack of creative arts and culture. Interestingly a church has been on that site since at 1086, as mentioned in the Domesday Book.

The Start of our Journey of Transformation

14. The first step on appointment as Leader, was to have a frank and engaging conversation with the then Chief Executive Officer, John Bunnnett, who was an experienced CEO, who had been in-post since he joined our Council in 2009. This was the start of an excellent working relationship that was built on mutual respect and a really good understanding and appreciation of what was needed.

15. We agreed that we needed to appoint a marketing company, to assist us in promoting Ashford as an entrepreneurial organisation with ambitious aspirations. Firstly needed to sharpen the focus on the economic expansion of Ashford, by attracting significant inward investment. We had to act like a business, in line with Government policy, and the reducing Government grant.
16. Once our newly appointed marketing company Pillory Barn, was in place, they arranged for us to attend a major national marketing exhibition in London. This allowed us to attract serious inward economic investment and we followed up by running our own marketing event at the German Gymnasium in London. The success of both of these events, soon caused Ashford to be quite independently recognised as the "Number One Business Location in Kent".
17. In order to release the land that was being held in the ownership, of what was then the Homes and Community Agency but destined for the redevelopment of Ashford - there was a pressing need to meet with them. At that meeting with myself and the then CEO John Bunnett, we firmly explained our wish to put this land into productive use to transform Ashford. This was in line with a Treasury letter sent to all Homes and Community Agencies across the UK, advising them to either action the use of their land holding or sell off the land. We further explained to them that we intended to drive forward the economic transformation of Ashford, and were prepared to buy the land holdings from them.
18. Within a few days, the Council received a formal invitation to purchase most of the land being held by them. This included the, hugely important, Commercial Quarter site and land along Elwick Road that included the old cattle market site. The invitation also included the purchase International House opposite the International Station. We immediately accepted their offer.
19. We now needed to sharpen our approach to economic development and accordingly in 2013, I formed the "Ashford Strategic Delivery Board". Such a properly constituted Board allowed us to hit the ground running. We started by identifying what we call the "Big 8" most important strategic projects that needed a multi-agency input to effectively deliver them. The Board Members consisted of key players drawn from a range of partners. Our local MP, the Rt. Hon Damian Green MP was a key member.
20. There can be little doubt that many significant achievements have been made in the last decade by our collective efforts in collaboration with our strategic partners. Whilst many of these changes are now self-evident, I believe that it is right and proper to record and remind ourselves of them, starting with the "Big 8".

Jasmin Vardimon 2013:

New Creative Dance and Laboratory Hub now at Javelin Way. We had already attracted, the internationally renowned Jasmin Vardimon Dance Company to relocate to Ashford and we soon realised that their longer term aspirations would greatly assist us in the promotion of creative arts in Ashford. In 2019 the Arts Council England awarded a grant of over £3 million for their New Creative Dance and Laboratory Hub, which has now been built at Javelin Way in Ashford, and to which we have additionally contributed nearly £1 million. The Hub formally opened on the 7th December 2022.

Chilmington Green Outline Planning Permission for 5,750 new homes 2014:

Planning Permission was granted in 2017 for the development of a Garden Community of 5,750 homes, plus a countryside park, secondary school, four primary schools, supermarket and a new high street and market square on rural land to the south west of Ashford.

New Ashford College 2017:

For over a decade we had spoken about a new Ashford College, but still only had an earmarked site. We worked with the Department of Education and others to ensure a new and first class FE & HE Ashford College, right near to the International Station. ABC contributed three million pounds to the build. Recent further Government funding has been given and work is well underway on the two new extensions of the College which are due to open in September 2023.

Construction of Junction 10A - Cost over £100 million 2017:

The Government granted a Development Consent Order for the M20 Junction 10A in December 2017. This was a huge civil engineering infrastructure project costing well over £100 million. The new Junction was officially opened in December 2019.

Ashford International Station - New Signalling April 2018: (Big 8 Project)

This major project costing circa £10 million to up-grade the signalling to take the new rolling stock on our High Speed 1 rail link. We secured nearly £10 million of investment for the up-grading of our signalling, (Spurs Project), to enable Eurostar's new Siemens Class 374 'e320' trains to call at Ashford International Station. Covid has unfortunately interrupted Eurostar's service which we are now seeking to have re-instated at the earliest possible opportunity.

New Cinema Complex Elwick Road 2018:

Investment in the New Cinema Leisure and Commercial scheme to stimulate our economy and to create vibrancy was an act of faith and belief in Ashford. In 2018 we turned an old derelict Cattle Market site into a meaningful area of public realm with a state of the art Cinema with units under. This was in a designated public Shared Space, which still has yet to reach its full potential.

Commercial Quarter - Connect 38 Building 2018:

In 2018 we saw the first new landmark office building on the designated Commercial Quarter in over a decade - a derelict site being used as a temporary carpark.

Designer Outlet Expansion 2020:

We worked hard with the Outlet Centre to ensure that we would only approve their £90million pound expansion, which opened on the 7th of November 2019, if it moved towards the Town Centre, thus adding to the cohesion of Ashford's more dynamic central core, which it did. The expected footfall is set to rise from about 3 million a year to about some 6 million.

21. This strategy paved the way for considerable change, but it came with many challenges. It was pleasing that Cabinet Colleagues, Elected Members across all Parties and our Officers came together to support the ambition on this exciting journey. However, all the achievements documented in the Report to Council have only been delivered by the concerted efforts and commitment of our professional council officers, led from the outset by the CEO John Bunnnett, but

for the last seven years continued with our current CEO Tracey Kerly who has been pivotal in this journey of transformation.

22. It would be quite remiss of me not to mention the other Group Leaders and their Member Colleagues, who have worked closely with the Conservative Administration, in a constructive way to bring about these meaningful changes which have been of significant benefit to our Borough.
23. Given the nature of Local Government, it was also clear that we needed to work closely with Paul Carter, the then Leader of the Kent Country Council. Accordingly I approached Paul to suggest that we agreed a formal joint delivery pact.
24. Communication, both internally and externally, are always extremely important elements, but more so when embarking on such a transformational journey. Group Leaders also needed to work together in a spirit of mutual respect and co-operation, all in the best interests of the electorate.

Ashford Borough Council – Other Major Projects

25. There were of course a number other very significant "Major Projects" that Ashford could be largely delivered through our own efforts or by assisting others using our influence as a progressive Borough. The phrase "Fortune Favours the Brave" is applicable when considering some of these projects, as I very briefly explained each in chronological order: -

Ashford Recycling 2013:

When appointed Leader of the Council in early 2013, Ashford was formally recorded as the worst Council in the UK for recycling. It needs to be said that such a listing was both unfair and inaccurate given the system being used. Nevertheless, within two years Ashford was and remains the very best district in Kent for "Recycling" and one of the best in the UK. Our contracted out Waste and Recycling collection service has proved extremely robust, very reliable and much appreciated by the public. We are now currently out to tender for a new contract.

Christchurch House Purchased in late 2013:

Property purchased at Auction for £278,000 which was filmed on "Homes Under the Hammer". Once adapted it opened in September 2014, providing 8 units of temporary accommodation and sits in the General Fund. This has both saved money on the General Fund and has provided a better standard of temporary accommodation. The adaptations ensures a wheelchair accessible unit and has storage space and a pleasant courtyard. The project paid for itself in just 3 years.

A Better Choice for Property Ltd Company - 2014:

With Government cutting core funding and encouraging Local Authorities to become more commercial and entrepreneurial, we created an arms-length Property Company. To date we have 105 units under management, and 340 units within development plans, raising £3.2m of net interest for the General Account since inception. The progress of this company has sadly been blighted by the Stodmarsh issue that needs to be resolved.

Phase 1 - Farrow Court Completed in November 2015:

The whole Project was for 104 homes made up from 82 independent living homes, 14 homes for those with learning disabilities, 7 Home-bridge dwellings which prevents "Bed Blocking" in hospitals. There is also one guest accommodation. It has an Age UK Day Care Centre. Project cost some £17m which was supported by grants from Homes England and KCC. The second and final Phase 2 was completed in October 2017. These homes are fully dementia friendly.

Acquisition of Park Mall December 2015:

The acquisition of Park Mall was another fairly bold step to enliven an important town centre retail area. A third of the 34 outlets were empty, unsightly and depressing. The acquisition was achieved, at a very advantageous purchase price. We immediately filled the empty units and thus revitalised the area and are planning to redevelop in the short term.

Aspire Landscaping Management formed in October 2016:

Creating In-House grounds maintenance in October 2016, was a bold and decisive move. By working with Paul Carter, the KCC Leader, and in-line with the District Deal, Paul was persuaded to allow us to take on-board this work directly. It meant transferring 20 staff onto our pay-roll and purchasing a new Depot at the cost of £1.1 million, plus buying all new vehicles, and equipment. This has been a huge success and has transformed the curation of our Borough.

The One You Health Care Shop - February 2017:

The "One You" shop, is a partnership between Ashford Borough Council, Kent County Council and Kent Community Health NHS Foundation Trust. Opened in Park Mall in February 2017 and was the only physical location in the country where visitors can just pop in to get advice on a range of personal health matters. Within a year it was being so well supported that we needed to move to a larger unit, which we did in 2019. The new unit has a "Changing Places" toilet for those with extra needs, as well as a family friendly area for parents to sit, relax feed their babies.

Largest Overnight HGV Truck Stop 2017:

Our one and only Overnight Truck Stop at Waterbrook with 300 spaces was totally inadequate to accommodate the number of HGV's needing overnight provision. It was pleasing to persuade the owner to develop and to the extent that it more than doubled the size of the Truck Stop to 650 spaces, thus giving us a new Truck Stop with all modern overnight facility. This opened in December 2021 and is the largest in Europe.

HGV Clamping 2017:

By lobbying the Department of Transport we were the first and only Authority in the UK to be allowed to clamp HGV's for inappropriate overnight parking. This followed an 18 Month Trial started in October 2017 and we started clamping in 2019. Now virtually no HGV's are found parking inappropriately, particularly overnight in Lay-bys on the A20 at Hothfield.

Noakes Meadow Development completed in February 2018:

Provides 2 newly built 2 bedroom semi-detached bungalows at the cost of £390,000. These were designed and built as wheelchair friendly dwellings. The construction included fully adjustable height worktops and the provision of heavier joists fitted to allow for a later hoist provision.

Christchurch Lodge Purchased June 2019 for £430,000:

This property, adjacent to Christchurch House, once purchased was adapted and completed in 2020. Due to Tier 4 Covid, the first tenant occupied in January 2021. It provided for 8 temporary homes that could accommodate up to 25 people.

Victoria Park - Heritage Lottery Award August 2019:

ABC successfully awarded £3m from Heritage Lottery Fund for revitalisation of Victoria Park, and although Covid has delayed work, we were awarded further lottery funds to compensate for the interruptions. Work is now well underway and should open in the spring of 2023.

The Coachworks Opened in August 2019:

The "Meanwhile Use" of the old Coachworks - another brownfield site has turned out to be a success even with the Covid 19 restrictions, interrupting its progress and as we move forward we will be able to judge just how it continues to develop and contribute to our economy.

New "Curious" Brewery Opened in May 2019:

We worked with the developer to deliver a New Brewery on a brownfield a site, in the centre of Ashford, right by the International Station. This compliments what has been happening around the central area of Ashford and has been well received and supported.

Danemore HRA - Independent Living Scheme Opened February 2019:

This scheme provided 34 homes at a cost of £7.85m. The scheme was opened by Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal in February 2020. These homes are fully dementia friendly.

Planning Approval for New International Film Studios April 2020:

The planning approval was granted for the redevelopment of the old Newtown Railway works, which had been derelict for decades, to create four International Film Studios and Creative Art Works. This is a hugely positive for Ashford and a catalyst for our economic growth and indeed that of the County and indeed the UK plc. To this end the Government has seen fit to grant Ashford £14.75 million of Levelling Up Funding towards this particular project. We were one of only two districts in the whole of Kent to be awarded Levelling Up Funding.

New Winery & Visitor Centre - July 2020:

Planning permission granted for New Winery and Visitor Centre near Chilham Castle, with over one million vines planted already by Domaine Evremond in collaboration with Taittinger & UK Partners Hatch Mansfield, to make Ashford Vineyards, become a Wine Region of the UK. Construction work is now well underway.

Roundabout Design May 2020:

Ashford was the first district in Kent to have its roundabouts re-designed as "Drive On - Drive Off" for maintenance purpose, thus avoiding the need to cone them off for safety reasons. The five gateway roundabouts are to be themed to provide more relevance and interest. We have received national recognition for the Landscaping of the Flanders Roundabout with the Soldiers and WWI Tank and the Orchard Heights Roundabout with the Steeplechase Horses depicting

the Charing Race Course. Both of these featured in the "Best of Britain Roundabouts 2021 Calendar".

Two New Apartment Blocks Purchased in Nov 2020 - Affordable Homes for Key Workers:

During the Pandemic we bought two newly constructed apartment blocks of 109 apartments at a cost of £18.65m, for Key Workers at an affordable rents, (Somerset Heights 44 homes in November 2020 and Stour Heights 65 homes in May 2021). Once purchased we were successful in receiving over £2 million in grants from Home England towards our outlay.

Stour Centre Major Renovation & Successful Eco Grant - November 2020:

The Council secured nearly £1.5 million of grant to install new eco-friendly heating as part of the multi million renovation of the Stour Centre, this has had a major environmental impact on one of our most important large public facilities.

Hampton by Hilton Hotel – Opened August 2021:

The global value hotel brand announced the opening of the Hampton by Hilton Ashford International Hotel. The hotel appears to be doing very well.

New Rebuild of East Stour Court completed September 2021:

This complete rebuild provided 29 independent living homes - 24 one bed apartments and 5 two bed. This cost of £7.1m for which we received £1.21 million grant from Homes England. All fully dementia friendly.

Ashford Awarded £550,000 from the Safer Streets Fund - Autumn 2021:

This funding allowed us to greatly improve the safety of Ashford town centre. A range of measures were delivered that included, network of safe places, additional radios purchased, more CCTV cameras, wall-mounted mirrors and personal safety equipment. Ashford Streetwise App launched in April 2022 and can be downloaded at no charge via the Apple or Android app store.

Regeneration of the Poplars to create Berry Place - February 2022:

Complete new development of 31 independent living homes at a cost of £7.9m and towards which Homes England gave grant of £1.4m. These were built to high energy efficiency standards with EPC rating of B, PV Panels and underfloor heating. All fully dementia friendly.

Brompton the UK Largest Bicycle Manufactures, to Locate in Ashford - March 2022

Brompton's have decided to re-locate both their Factory and business Headquarters here in Ashford. This will be a state of the art high-tech factory set in a wetland Park with its business headquarters also built on site. Brompton's have now submitted their Planning Application for a new revolutionary Factory, which has been validated and will now come before the Planning Committee for consideration.

The Brickworks at Halstow Way Completed in June 2022:

Construction of 17 stunning apartments, consisting of 6 one bedroom apartments, 7 two bedroom apartments and 4 duplex three bedroom apartments, built to EPC 'B' rating. This cost £4.3m, of which we received £1m grant from Homes England.

Planning approval for new 92 bed hotel in New Rents – July 2022:

A new 92 bed hotel, with a bar, restaurant and spa received planning permission.

Planning Approval for the Henwood Short Stay Development - August 2022:

This development will provide for 23 temporary homes in a modular form using state of the arts technology, which allows for net zero carbon in operation. This utilises an under used car park, to provide quality temporary accommodation, which reduces the cost to the General Account.

Tenterden Leisure Centre Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme – November 2022:

We were awarded circa £2m in Round 3 of the PSDS Grant, all of which will be spent on Tenterden Leisure Centre and ABC are topping this up with a further £400k to install PV panels, air source heat pumps and more.

Other Important Ashford Borough Council Actions

26. There are matters that could be described as more general or perhaps more domestic, but they are nevertheless significant in painting a more complete picture of the progress made in the last decade at Ashford Borough Council by us all pulling together. What we do both internally and externally does influence Central Government's opinion of Ashford and its standing as a progressive Local Authority.

Ashford Civic Awards - 2012:

The Council introduced the first Civic Awards in 2012 to recognise our community champions. This was in the year that Her Majesty, our late Queen celebrated her Diamond Jubilee. Six years later in 2018, and once again hosted the Civic Awards to highlight our wonderful communities. In this year of our late Queen we hosted the Platinum Civic Awards, held at Chart Hills Golf Club, Biddenden on Friday the 23 September 2022. This was such a fitting and poignant occasion, following the sad death of our much loved Queen Elizabeth II.

Members Grants 2013:

Since the introduction of the Ward Member Grants a decade ago, over £1.14 million has been given to support a range of differing charity and volunteer groups across all the Wards in Ashford.

Community Services Grants 2013:

The amount issued from this fund over the last decade has totalled over £1.9 million.

Capital & Small Revenue Grants 2013:

Amount issued from this third fund over the last decade has totalled over £725,000.

These three above grants total over £3.77 million.

Pioneered Housing Space Standards 2013:

In 2013 we boldly introduced Housing Space Standards to eliminate the building of small cramped homes with very small gardens. In March 2015 the Government followed our lead and introduced National Space Standards, but they did not include garden sizes.

Lord Heseltine's Comments at Ebbsfleet Development Event July 2014:

Tracey Kerly and I attended the event, where I was asked to explain just how Ashford was achieving such success in delivering economic growth and quality housing. As I ended my address, Lord Heseltine turned to the assembled audience and firmly said "That is how it should be done – clearly Ashford is unstoppable".

The Chancellor of the Exchequer Invites Ashford to address the Treasury July 2014:

I wrote to the then Chancellor George Osborne, after one of his Budgets supporting what he was proposing, but indicating my disappointment regarding the execution and delivery. In doing so I advised him of the success we were having using the "Ashford Model" for the economic delivery and measured quality housing growth. The Chancellor was most interested and invited us to meet with Senior Officials at the Treasury, to advise them about the success of the "Ashford Model". Those present included the Chancellor's Special Adviser Mr Neil O'Brien together with David Silk, Deputy Director of Housing Planning and Cities and Katy Baldwin, Head of Housing Supply and Planning Team. This visit resulted in the Government reversing its decision regarding £3 million of funding for affordable homes.

Framework Documents 2014:

In order to promote a more collective and well informed approach involving all elected Members, especially following local elections, "Framework Documents" were introduced. These gave both existing and newly elected Members, a much clearer understanding of the Council, its various departments together with contact details of key officers.

Leader and Borough Briefings 2014:

The Leader's Briefings were introduced to communicate and inform all Members and Officers of the Authority about a range of matters. Borough Briefings were also introduced and circulated to all Parishes, Community Councils and Forums. Our representative in Parliament, the Rt. Hon Damian Green MP, was included in this communication network.

Group Leaders Meetings 2015:

Regular monthly meetings with the Opposition Group Leaders were established, whereby the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive would meet with Group Leaders to discuss forthcoming Cabinet Reports and other relevant business.

Ashford & KCC District Delivery Deal 2015:

This signed District Deal mentioned in the opening paragraphs, has assisted us in our partnership working to deliver the best quality outcomes for our residents, businesses and visitors.

The Town Centre Action Team (T-CAT) introduced in February 2015:

A dedicated town team introduced to focus on the cleanliness and curation of our town centres. After a few years T-CAT was integrated into the newly formed Aspire Landscape Management.

The Ashford Bandstand Renovated 2015:

We renovated and installed a new permanent canopy at a cost of £65,000. This was funded from the New Homes Bonus budget. The new canopy replaced the bright yellow parasol that previously offered shelter to performers, but was in a poor state of disrepair and no longer operated.

Creation of the Civic Park 2018:

The North Park, right in the heart of the Civic Centre was renamed our "Civic Park". It was greatly improved by Aspire, and we erected a dignified sign with our Armorial Bearings.

New Memorial Civic Beacon October 2018:

We commissioned the design and construction of our gas fired Civic Beacon, to be sited in the Civic Park. The Beacon was lit for the first time at a Remembrance Service on Sunday the 11th November 2018, to mark the centenary of the end of the First World War. The National Tribute was called "Battle's Over - A Nation's Tribute". Our Beacon is also a memorial in memory of the 17th century Cavalier Poet, Richard Lovelace (1617 - 1657), the Lord of the Manor at Lovelace Place, Bethersden - an extract from one of his poems are the words "With Stronger Faith" which we have used as the Motto on our Coat of Arms and the poem is reproduced on the base of the Beacon.

Ashford - Snow Dogs 2018:

The wonderful Ashford Snow Dog Trail lasted from the 12th September until the 18th of November 2018. This was a wonderful lead-up to Christmas. So many adults and children enjoyed this uplifting project and we raised nearly £150,000 for our Pilgrims Hospice.

"Ashford For You" House Magazine Introduced Spring 2018:

It was our CEO, Tracey Kerly, who suggested that we introduce our quarterly House Magazine to engage and inform all our residents about what is happening in our Borough. The magazine is distributed quarterly, to every household in the Borough and has been a great success.

Local Government Chronicle Awards 2018:

Ashford Shortlisted as "Council of the Year" and as the most "Entrepreneurial Council".

Local Plan Adopted February 2019:

It was good to have our Local Plan to 2030, approved and adopted. This ensures that the housebuilding and the business development is located in the most appropriate sites that does not harm our countryside. In addition we have been working with Parishes on Neighbourhood Plans.

Honorary Alderman Created July 2019:

The introduction of the above award to recognise long and meaningful public service given by a number of elected members of the Authority. This award was a recognition of the dignity of civic office.

The Ashford Borough Council - Honorary Ambassadorial Award - October 2018:

The introduction of the above award was to recognise and honour those making a significant contribution to the development, wellbeing and/or civic dignity of the Borough.

Changing Places Toilets 2019:

We made a conscious decision to have many more Changing Places toilets in Ashford. These are the fully accessible toilets that are designed to help bring major, life enhancing freedoms to the disabled people living in and visiting our Borough. We want to have one in every area of public realm across our Borough - we now have a very significant number and will be creating more.

Covid 19 Pandemic March 2020:

The handling of this tragic pandemic on behalf of our residents, businesses and interface with Central Government and other partners has been highly professional. Our caring and commitment together with our readiness to work so closely with emergency planning and our "Ashford Critical Emergency Resilience" (ACER) committee and its relationship with the excellent Voluntary Sector and other local caring people across our whole Borough has been first class.

Queen's Green Canopy 2021/22:

Ashford has undertaken to plant 135,500 trees - one for every person residing in our Borough as part of the Queens Platinum Jubilee - Green Canopy. This will take some time and should be achieved over the next two years. We have to-date planted over 106,000 trees in our Borough.

Forestry Commission Trees 2021:

The provision of 6,666 trees by the Forestry Commission assisted in our tree planting and it is a clear indicator of the standing we have, in that we were awarded such a significant number. These particular trees will effectively create a new forest at Discovery Park, on the Chilmington Green Development and they greatly contribute of our total 135,500 trees for our population.

Government approved the re-naming of Discovery Park to Honour our late Queen - 2021:

Following discussions with Cabinet Colleagues, Principal Officers, Group Leaders and the Civic and Ceremonial Programme Board, I wrote to Government in late 2021 seeking formal permission to re-name the 147 acre Discovery Park, which was currently being formed as part of the three "Garden Settlements", in honour of Her Majesty's forthcoming milestone Platinum Jubilee. I was pleased that, in July 2022 we were granted formal Government permission to re-name Discovery Park "The Queen's Platinum Jubilee Park". The Civic and Ceremonial Programme Board unanimously support that we rename the park accordingly. The Cabinet, at their meeting of the 24th of November 2022, formally endorsed the renaming of the Boroughs Discovery Park.

Charlton Athletic Community Trust Project (A Sporting Chance) - September 2021:

A programme aimed at using the power of sport and physical activities to create safer, stronger and more respectful communities by engaging with young people

in high need areas. The feedback, reported to Elected Members in March 2022, has been extremely positive.

Greater Ashford Land Mapping Commission - October 2021:

With the ever increasing demand by the Government for more and more housing growth, the elected colleagues and senior officers, agreed to the establishment of an independent Greater Ashford Land Mapping Commission. On the 6th December their Formal Report was submitted.

Launch of Ashford Community Lottery in January 2022:

The Ashford Community Lottery was launched in January 2022 and after the prizes and administration costs have been deducted, the remaining 60% of sales will go to good causes.

The G line bus Service Rerieved - April 2022:

The vital G line bus route in Ashford that was due to be scrapped was saved by the intervention of the Council. The G line, which runs from Godinton Park to South Willesborough, was due to end on 19th April after operator Stagecoach claimed the service was 'unviable'.

Additional Funding for three Play Areas - May 2022

Following the opening of the Hunters Avenue play area, a further budget provision of £1.1 million was made for major upgrades and improvements to three play areas. These were at Central Park in Park Farm Ward, Spearpoint Recreational Ground in Kennington and Rylands Road Open Space in Bockhanger. This is part of our wider commitment to strengthen our sport activities and play areas across the entire Borough.

80th Anniversary – HMS Albacore & Ashford Sea Cadets – June 2022

Service of Remembrance and the unveiling of a Memorial to HMS Albacore in the Memorial Gardens took place on the 4th June 2022. HMS Albacore was adopted by Ashford on the 16th June 1942 following fundraising for the War effort. Later that month the Ashford Sea Cadet Unit was established.

New Athletics Track for the Julie Rose International Stadium - August 2022:

The completely new Athletics Track, at a cost of some £300,000, was opened in August 2022. This investment is just part of a larger budget provision for sport and leisure that extends to Stour Leisure Centre, Spearpoint, Waterside and Pitchside as well as at the Tenterden Leisure Centre.

Low Tax & Low Unemployment:

We have been and remain, the lowest Council Taxing district in Kent and one of the lowest in the UK, but are still providing a wide range of quality services. We are a low unemployment area.

Ashford International Involvement and Participation

27. It was very important given our geographical location, with a High Speed Rail Service and the Channel Tunnel Link, that we embraced our international status that rather goes hand in hand with our history and heritage. That is evidenced by a number of milestones: -

Syrian Refugee Programme 2015:

In 2015 we undertook to play our part in supporting the Government by being one of the first to take about 10 to 12 families a year from the war torn Syria. Their integration into the community has worked extremely well and we take pride in our approach and handling of this sensitive matter. Indeed, the Home Office made a video of our approach and circulated it widely.

Ashford Economic Resilience Reserve 2016:

Following the "Brexit Referendum" in 2016, the Finance Department were instructed, to create a new £3 million reserve, to counter any market fluctuations or financial impact. Our dedicated finance staff did create a reserve of some £2.9 million by the end of our Term of Office in 2019. The immediate financial impact of Brexit was less than expected, but we then faced the serious Pandemic, where this reserve fund proved to be a very useful source of additional funding.

The Queen Marie Statue 2018:

Following an approach by Romania Government, we agreed to the erection and unveiling of a full sized statue of late Queen Marie of Romania - the Granddaughter of Queen Victoria and who was born at Eastwell Park (Manor) in Ashford in October 1875.

Fields of Battle, Lands of Peace - External Exhibition in the Guildhall London 2018:

We were quite honoured to be invited by the City of London to jointly host the inaugural "International Fields of Battle, Lands of Peace" Commemoration Exhibition in the Courtyard of the Guildhall London, before coming to Ashford and then moving to other national and international venues.

Correspondent of New York Times visits Ashford – 2018

Peter Goodman, Global Economic Correspondent for the New York Times, visited Ashford on 14th December 2018 and spent the day with us researching why Ashford appeared to be doing so well as a local authority. He returned on 28 January 2019 to take photos and do follow up interviews. The article, duly appeared in print on 23 June on Page A6 of the New York Times edition with the headline: "An Austerity Workaround for U.K. Cities: Going Into Business".

Eurostar Service Halted 2020:

Due to the Pandemic the Eurostar services were halted and remain so. Every effort needs to be continually made to ensure the return of that service.

Port Health September 2020:

Following our exit from the EU, Government purchased the Sevington site, earmarked in our Local Plan for economic development. The site was needed to, set up an Inland Port Facility. We have been charged with running part of that facility. We now have to deal with all the HGV traffic coming through the Channel Tunnel together with perhaps some coming from Dover. Government are rethinking the scope and nature of the facility and thereby created a good deal of uncertainty.

Afghan Refugee Programme 2021:

Once again we were to the fore in accepting Afghan Refugees who assisted our armed forces.

French Elections 2022:

In 2022 we were designated as a "Polling Station" for both the French Presidential elections and thereafter for the French Legislature elections.

Ukrainian Refugees 2022:

More recently we are working with Government to resettle refugees from the war torn Ukraine.

Conclusion

28. All that has been shown in the presentation and embodied in this Report to Council, is empirical evidence that shows just how much effort has been put in by so many to bring about such a lengthy list of our collective achievements over the last decade. This Administration has, by working with our elected colleagues, dedicated officers and our external partners, been able to deliver a wide range of economic projects. We have also delivered the much needed housing that has been carefully sited in line with our Local Plan which has at its very core, the protection of our wonderful countryside. We have at the same time endeavoured to create more civic pride and a greater appreciation of our history, heritage and the protection of our planet. All of this has only been achieved by the dedication and support of our principal officers who, in turn have been well served by hard working and dedication of all of our professional staff and indeed our residents and businesses have in many ways also contributed.
29. The most recent major projects, under the banner of "The Super 6", include: - the new Studios at Newtown Works; the new Brompton Bike Factory/Headquarters; Ashford College Phase 2; South Ashford Garden Community; Stodmarsh nutrient neutrality; and the development in the Town Centre. Many of these will be well underway by the time I stand down as Executive Leader of Ashford Borough Council following the May 2023 Local Elections. Even as I write other projects are emerging that will require our future consideration
30. After a 30 year career in the UK Fire Service, I spent a further eight years as an Independent Member of the Kent Police Authority and will by May 2023 have spent over 17 years with Ashford Borough Council. This gives a total of some 55 years of public service - it is now time to embrace the final four months remaining of this term of office.
31. It has been an honour and a privilege to have served the people of Ashford both as an elected Member of this Authority and for the last decade as the Leader of the Council. I believe it has been a challenging but fruitful and productive journey that we have all shared. I have enjoyed working with so many good and hardworking people all striving to make Ashford a safe and a more vibrant place to live, work and most importantly enjoy. It only remains for me and my wife Rose, who has been the "Wind Beneath My Wings", to wish you all the very best for the future in your stewardship of this very special Borough.
32. **I commend this report to Council and would ask that it be received, noted and formally recorded.**

Cllr Gerry Clarkson, Executive Leader of Ashford Borough Council