

## **2022/23 Annual Governance Statement**

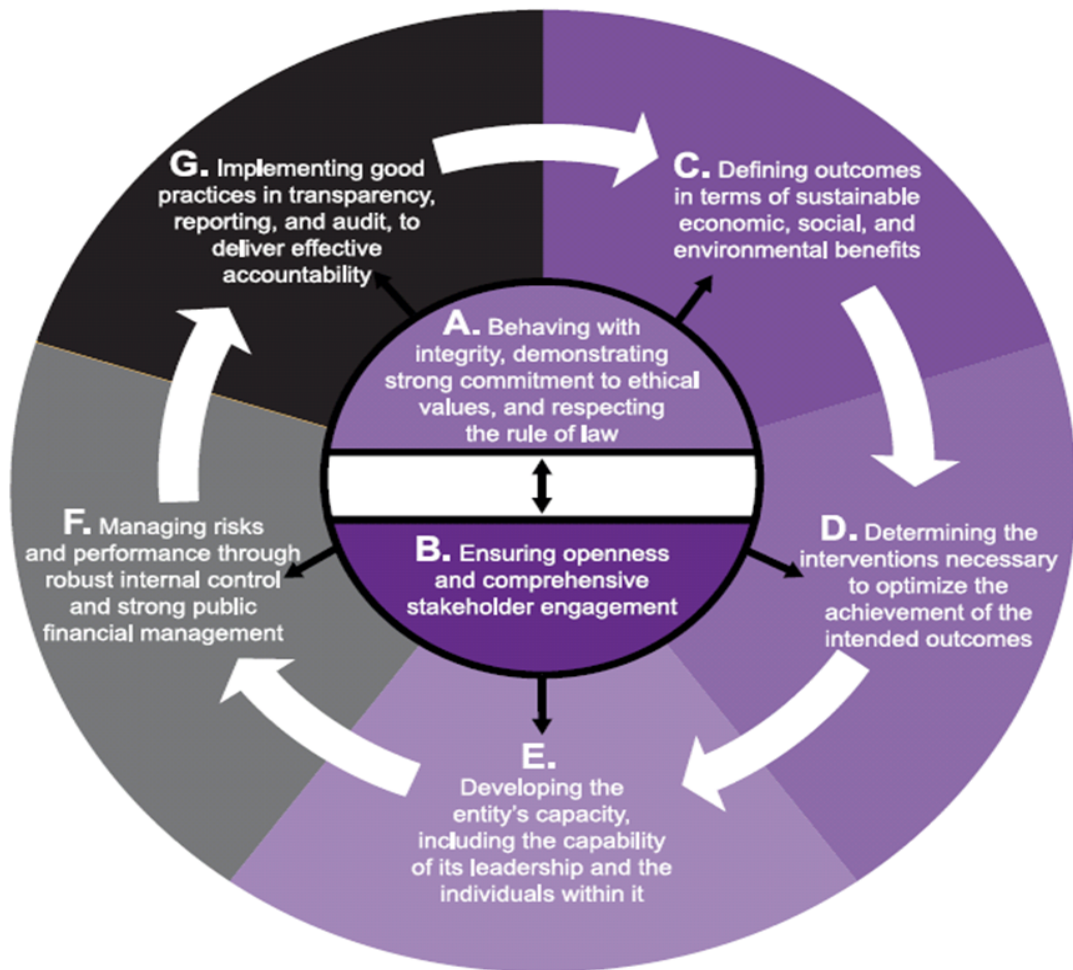
### **Scope of responsibility**

1. Ashford Borough Council is responsible for ensuring its decisions and business are conducted according to the law and proper standards. Public money must be properly accounted for and all resources applied efficiently and effectively in order to secure best value for its residents and taxpayers.
2. The production of an Annual Governance Statement (AGS) is a requirement of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015, regulation 6(1). Good governance is fundamental to meeting the council's responsibilities and achieving high levels of service for residents. The Statement explains the effectiveness of the governance arrangements for the year ending 31 March 2023 and sets out any action for planned improvements in the following year 2023/24. This statement provides assurance to the council and its stakeholders that good governance arrangements are in place.

### **The Local Code of Corporate Governance**

3. In 2016 the council adopted an updated Local Code of Corporate Governance, which follows principles contained in national guidance and produced by CIPFA and SOLACE.

The code sets out seven principles shown in the diagram on the next page:



4. The main principle underpinning this Code is that the council's governance processes and structures focus on delivering sustainable economic, societal, and environmental outcomes.
5. The council meets the principles in the Code through a framework of policies, procedures, behaviours and values. This framework provide Members and officers with effective tools and consistent governance arrangements across the organisation.
6. The diagram explains good governance is dynamic, and that the council should be committed to continuous improvement.
7. This AGS sets out:
  - Part 1:** how the council is dealing with improvement areas identified in last year's AGS.
  - Part 2:** how the council complies with the principles of good governance set out within the Local Code.
  - Part 3:** any planned changes to the council's governance arrangements for implementation during 2023/24.

## **Part 1: Dealing with last year's key improvements areas**

8. The 2021/22 AGS identified eight key improvement areas. Progress on remedying these governance exceptions has been reported to the Audit Committee during the year and is set out below.

### **Appraisals Training**

9. Appraisal training sessions have been held throughout the year, to ensure staff could complete their appraisals comprehensively using the competency framework. Sessions were held during January 2022 which covered Competency and how it was achieved, monitored and evidenced. Additionally, improvements have been made to the appraisals e learning course that also provides guidance for staff to evidence their competencies in line with the framework. Both the training sessions and online course were well received by staff and this reflected in the appraisal submissions received during 2022.

### **Review of the Constitution**

10. The Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer has been working with specialist lawyers to review the constitution provisions in relation to executive arrangements. The constitution has been updated to reflect the arrangements and is available on the council's website. A wider health check of the constitution is in progress to identify further opportunities for presenting the constitution in a more concise modern format.

### **Hybrid Equipment in the Council Chamber**

11. The council has explored different options for upgrading the technology used to support council meetings and facilitate different ways for the public to engage. New equipment has been successfully installed in two council committee rooms to enable smaller hybrid meetings. Work is also underway to implement a new technological system in the council chamber and a plan is in place to deliver this in September 2023.

### **Section 106 Process**

12. Since May 2022, officers have been working hard to respond to the Mid Kent Audit Partnership recommended actions in addition to those identified by an [Overview and Scrutiny Task Group](#).

### **Member Induction Programme**

13. The Member Induction Programme has been compiled in preparation for the newly elected council in May 2023. The programme was approved by Cabinet in December 2022. A framework document is also being prepared for newly elected members to summarise the key contacts and headline functions of each Directorate.
14. The programme is intended to follow the successful induction arrangements in the past but also seek to build on these and make improvements where we can. A number of sessions have already been confirmed, with work being undertaken

on expanding the offer as the year progresses. There will be a mix of 'in-person' and 'virtual' sessions, with the majority of the earlier sessions held 'in-person' to ensure that councillors are able to meet one another and form working relationships amongst themselves and Officers.

### **Ashford Manager Programme**

15. The Ashford Manager Programme was developed to support managers of the future who may be getting ready to step into their next senior role. The programme aims to help individuals make connections between Management Team and leadership in readiness for future opportunities. The first cohort of the Programme was completed during 2022 with more expected in 2023.
16. Additional training has been approved which aims to support managers with their specific development needs. This training has been delivered virtually learning throughout 2022 and is expected to continue in to 2023.

### **Corporate Risk Register Review**

17. The council refreshed its Corporate Risk Register in May 2022. The register was reviewed by the council's Management Team during a dedicated away day session to ensure the strategic risks to the delivery of the corporate plan are fully captured and managed accordingly.

### **Review of Data Protection Policies**

18. Over the course of 2022/23, a review of our data protection policies and procedures was conducted. The Data Protection Policy has been updated, privacy notices reviewed and Records of Processing Activity updated, and took into account departmental structure changes, tasks and activities.

## **Part 2: Compliance with the principles of good governance set out within the Local Code**

19. This section of the AGS sets out how we have complied with the principles within the local code in turn.

### **Principle A – Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law**

#### **Sources of Assurance**

Source of Assurance	Developments in 2022/23
Behaving with Integrity	
Members' Code of Conduct	<p>The Monitoring Officer's Annual Report for 2022 showed a significant reduction in code complaints which had been principally at parish level. Kent Monitoring Officers have just concluded a review of the Kent Code and Arrangements and these will be reported to members for decision.</p> <p>Regular meetings with KALC representatives to review measures being taken to reduce incidence of formal complaints.</p>
Annual staff performance appraisals	
Declarations of interest made at meetings	
Standards Committee including independent person	
Register of interests & hospitality	
Whistleblowing policy	
Complaints policy	
Open and accessible public meetings	
Social media guidance	
Annual staff performance appraisals	

Demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values	
Constitution	
Staff recruitment, retention policies	
Staff competency framework	
Corporate Training Programme	Compulsory wellbeing training for managers
Procurement policy, including social value	Social Value policy is being trialed internally.
Equalities objectives	
Corporate Values – Ambitious, Creative, Trustworthy	
Kent and Medway Information Sharing Partnership and Agreement	
SmartHub dedicated wellbeing area	
Respecting the rule of law	
Constitution	Review of the Constitution is ongoing. Please see update on this process given above
Job descriptions for all staff and Portfolio Holders	
Support provided for all committees	
Monitoring Officer	
Committee Terms of Reference	
Cabinet report template	
Anti-Fraud and Corruption policy	
Bribery Act 2010 Policy Statement	
Anti-Money Laundering Policy	
Breach Management Policy	
Contract Standing Orders (CSO's)	
Enforcement Framework	

Elections Act	The council have applied the changes outlined in the Elections Act as part of preparations for the May 2023 elections.
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### ***Behaving with integrity***

20. All agendas for council meetings seek declarations of interest and the type of interest. Ad hoc advice on interests is regularly sought from the Monitoring Officer and his staff by borough Councillors and parish clerks/councillors. This demonstrates a good level of understanding and a culture of compliance with the code of conduct in relation to interests. The Monitoring Officer's annual report each year deals with the activity under the council's ethical framework.
21. The Monitoring Officer's annual report to the Standards Committee assesses activity in probity and related governance matters and includes complaints to the Ombudsman. The Standards Committee monitors any issues of probity raised in Ombudsman investigations. The most recent report to the Committee in January 2023 covered the Ombudsman report on complaints for the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 to 31 March 2022). The number of complaints has been generally consistent with previous years, one was upheld by the Housing Ombudsman Service and another partly upheld. Full details can be found in the [Monitoring Officer's report](#) to the Standards Committee.
22. The Monitoring Officer's report also covers code of conduct complaints for which there has been a significant reduction in the 2022 calendar year, mainly at parish council level. The report makes recommendations regarding future meetings between the council and KALC representatives. Full details can be found in the [Monitoring Officer's Report](#).
23. All new staff and Members receive induction and training upon arrival. For staff, the induction pack includes both a copy of the staff Code of Conduct, and the council's customer service values. The Member Training Panel has made arrangements for post-election code training and parish council representatives will be included. The Training Panel recognised the importance of this and also suggested that refresher training should be provided mid-term to help address councillor turnover at parish level. The induction programme being developed includes 'frameworks' which provide an overview of each council service. This will be complemented by a market stall event for new councillors to become familiar with council services.

### ***Demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values***

24. The council has adopted corporate values – Ambitious, Creative and Trustworthy (ACT) that are embedded into the council's governance framework. For example, they are incorporated into the recruitment and appraisals processes and are fundamental to the 'Our Principles' section of the Corporate Plan 2022-
25. The annual appraisal process is also based on a 'competency framework'. The framework outlines a set of professional and key behaviours that staff display

every day within their roles. The behaviours are linked to ACT as demonstrated in the table below:

AMBITIOUS	CREATIVE	TRUSTWORTHY
Positive	Innovative	Professional Behaviour
Continuous Improvement	Open to Change	Accountable
Commercial and Enterprising	Decision Making and Problem Solving	Communication

26. The framework continues to evolve to support staff to be the best they can and evidence this in a fair and consistent manner. The competencies are used for recruitment and selection; performance management including appraisals and training and development. Evidencing competencies was however, not widely demonstrated during the 2021 appraisal process. In response, further training sessions on appraisals and competencies have been undertaken during 2022 to help staff get the most out of their appraisal discussion. Four sessions were held that aimed at helping team members and five were held for Managers to guide them with performance appraisals and reviews. The sessions were well received and staff gained a more detailed understanding on how competency was achieved, monitored and evidenced. In addition to this, our overarching e-learning course, 'How to evidence competencies in the revised framework' was refreshed and so far 49 people have completed this.
27. The corporate training programme reflects the council's strong commitment to ethical values with topics in the 2022/23 programme including 'Dementia Friends', health and safety and safeguarding. There has also been a focus on understanding the needs of our diverse workforce and residents with training topics including leadership, project management and mental health and wellbeing. To embed the council's Corporate Plan theme Green Pioneer, a programme of carbon literacy training has been developed for rollout across the organisation this coming year.
28. The council maintains a programme focused on staff wellbeing which has been particularly important as the majority of staff work at home for a number of days per week. The way wellbeing content is shared to staff on a dedicated area to wellbeing on the SmartHub. A 'Cost of Living' blog series was launched to remind staff of their employee benefits which they could take advantage of and other tips that may help with staff worries about the future of rising costs. For example, one of the blogs focused on pension options.
29. Compulsory training for line managers was launched in 2022 to help managers and leaders effectively support employees by creating an environment that helps them to achieve optimal wellbeing. An additional opt in course was launched to help staff develop hands-on practical tools to help manage stress, enhance resilience and improve mental fitness to achieve personal goals.



### ***Respecting the rule of the law***

30. As a statutory body the council's structures for decision-making, its rules and its processes are influenced by legislation and associated regulation. A fundamental part of our governance, therefore, is the Constitution.
31. The Constitution is a legal requirement and sets out how the council runs, how it makes decisions and the guidance to be followed. Some of these processes are needed by law, while others are chosen by the council. The Constitution has several chapters, which set out the basic rules for governing the council's business. More detailed procedures and codes of practice are set out in accompanying rules and protocols.
32. Parts of the Constitution are periodically reviewed and changes made to ensure arrangements assist the council in achieving its ambitions and its responsibilities to its residents and taxpayers. A review of the Constitution was commissioned in June 2021 with a particular focus on presentation of the Executive arrangements. During 2022, the updated constitution was uploaded to the website. A wider review of the Constitution has now commenced with the objective of simplifying its presentation and make it more concise and easier to use.
33. It is proposed that an updated Constitution will be presented to the Full Council at its meeting in April 2023. In year changes will be recorded and reported to Full Council on an annual basis.

<p><b><u>Key Improvement Area 1: Changes to the Constitution should be track changed and presented to Full Council annually for formal approval.</u></b></p>
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34. The Government has introduced an Elections Act that will have a significant impact on the conduct of the borough and parish elections scheduled for 4 May 2023. The requirement for electors at polling stations to provide photographic identification is the headline change. Other changes being introduced and included and mitigated through the elections risk register include:
  - Introducing photographic voter identification for polls.
  - Limits on postal vote handling;
  - Removing the time limits on overseas voter registration;
  - Increasing accessibility requirements in polling stations;
  - EU Citizens voting and candidacy rights;
  - Changing the frequency of absent voting refreshes.
35. A comprehensive communications plan is in place to raise awareness with voters on the changes to ID requirements. As well as national campaigns, locally we will be carrying out direct communications with voters, advertising on poll cards, in Ashford for You magazine and through the council's website. Staff training has taken place to help raise awareness and there are briefings for councilors and agents.

36. A variety of boards, working groups and advisory committees covering different topics are constituted each year to deliver the business of the council to the benefit of residents and stakeholders.
37. All boards, committees and groups have clear objectives which are set out in their terms of reference and reviewed annually to ensure they remain relevant to delivering the council's objectives. This year a Welfare Advisory Group was established in response to the national cost of living crisis. For example, topics received by the group have included updates on grants, donations and feedback from the staff survey held to understand the issues faced by staff relating to the cost of living.

**Principle B – Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement**

**Sources of Assurance**

Source of Assurance	Developments in 2022/23
Openness	
Annual Report	
Council tax information available online	
Corporate Plan	
Regular Residents' Survey	
Quarterly Resident's magazine	
Consultation Portal	The council's approach to consultation has been reviewed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
Mod.Gov: Minutes, agendas, decisions published	
Hybrid Equipment to facilitate virtual and face to face meetings.	Installation of hybrid meeting equipment in the Council Chamber is underway.
Smart Hub	
Chief Executive monthly email newsletter	
Grants Policy	A draft Grants Policy is being developed in 2023
Engaging comprehensively with institutional stakeholders	
Command and Control Structure	
Ashford Strategic Delivery Board	
Ashford Health and Wellbeing Board	
Ashford Community Safety Partnership	
Armed Forces Pledge	
Land Mapping Commission	A final report of the commission has been received and will be considered to inform way forward for the Local Plan and Corporate F

UK Shared Prosperity Fund	The council received funding following their LIP submission.
Rural England Prosperity Fund	
Engaging stakeholder effectively, including individual citizens and service users	
Communications Strategy	
Equalities Impact Assessment Template	
IT, Digital and Customer Service Strategy	The new strategy was adopted by Cabinet in May 2022.

### **Other Sources of Assurance**

#### ***Openness***

38. In the latter part of 2022/23, a draft Grants Policy has been developed which will put out to public consultation. A key change in the policy will look to introduce more transparent reporting on grants provided to the voluntary and community sector and promote this good work, for example, it is proposed that an annual report on grants is submitted to the council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
39. Council committee and other types of meetings are conducted both in person and in hybrid form in line with government legislation. The council has continued to use the most appropriate way of meeting recognising the benefits of both virtual and face-to-face meetings. In particular, there has been an increase in members of the public attending virtual or hybrid meetings as they reduce the need for travel. During 2022, a project commenced to upgrade the IT infrastructure in place to support council meetings. Hybrid equipment has been installed in the council's Committee Rooms to facilitate smaller hybrid meetings and this has been well received by officers and Members. Work is underway to install hybrid equipment in the Council Chamber, which will facilitate larger meetings. This will increase opportunities for residents, councillors and officers to watch or participate in meetings online, negates journeys to the Civic Centre and reduces travel across the Borough. This will in turn contribute to our ambition for the council to become carbon neutral by 2030. The proposed system in the Council Chamber is expected to be implemented by September 2023.

#### ***Engaging comprehensively with institutional stakeholders***

40. During 2022, the council received funding allocations through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund. To access the funding, local authorities were asked to create a Local Investment Plan (LIP) supported by local partners. Ashford's strong relationship with its partners through the Ashford Strategic Delivery Board meant that an approach to the LIP was supported early on. A local partnership group with key stakeholders, identified through our Corporate Plan process, was brought together and oversaw and supported our LIP.

41. Over the past year, a Land Mapping Commission, commissioned by the Executive Leader, undertook an independent land mapping exercise of the borough that will shape future strategies. In addition to council membership, representatives from a range of interested stake holders are included on the Commission including Southern Water, The Council for the Protection of Rural England, Homes England and the Kent Association of Local Councils and the River Stour Internal Drainage Board. The Commission's report is due to be published in April 2023.

***Engaging with individual citizens and service users***

42. Consultation and engagement with residents and communities have taken place on specific issues and projects over the past year including:

Topic	Type of engagement
Equality Policy and Action Plan Consultation	Online consultation
Environment and Land Mapping Commission: Parish Survey	Online consultation
Environment and Land Mapping Commission: Ashford College Survey	Online consultation
Ashford Borough Council Residents' Survey 2022	Online consultation
Thorne Estate Development: Stage 1	Online consultation
Land Between Eastmead Avenue and Torrington Road Site Development: Stage 1	Online consultation
Charing Neighbourhood Plan	Online consultation
Tile Kiln Road Site Development: Stage 1	Online consultation
Cost of Living Survey	Online consultation
PSPO Consultation – Coney Bear Site	Online consultation
Bockhanger Square	Online consultation

43. The Council undertakes a Residents' Survey every two years to 10,000 households across the Borough. Residents have the opportunity to give feedback on the council, the local area and their priorities for the future. Residents were invited to take part by post and the survey was open to

responses online between 3rd May and 17th June, with paper copies available on request. 1,133 complete responses were received, providing a healthy sample for confidence in further statistical analysis.

44. A number of questions this year focused on attitudes toward digitalisation and online provision, areas which were deemed to be of particular importance for the council going forward. The results indicated that residents' general views on the council and its performance have stayed broadly consistent. Satisfaction with key services remains high and efforts to improve community safety and communication with residents appear to have been effective. Feedback on the council's response to the pandemic was positive and residents were generally happy with digitalisation efforts. The continued importance of accessible in-person options for older and digitally excluded residents was also made clear.
45. A public consultation on the draft budget is held each year. The Budget Scrutiny Task Group scrutinises whether the draft budget is sound and achievable. In order to ensure that residents are able to provide their views on the draft budget proposals, it is suggested that alternative ways of consulting with them are explored during 2023/24 to inform the next round of budget consultation.

<p><b><u>Key Improvement Area 2: To explore alternative ways of consulting with residents regarding the draft budget proposals for 2024/25.</u></b></p>
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46. A new strategy has been developed to bring together IT, Digital and Customer Services together with the aim of ensuring digital is at the forefront of improving the customer experience. The strategy was adopted by Cabinet during May 2022. In addition to this, the council's Digital Programme continues to work to improve online services and over the past year there has been significant focus to deliver a new planning system which was launched in the Summer of 2022, Further system upgrades are expected in the Safety and Wellbeing Service during 2023/24 that will aim to improve the customer experience as well streamline back office processes.
47. A review of consultation and engagement was undertaken by the council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee during summer 2022. The review looked at how the council approached public consultation and Members were particularly interested in how the council consulted with residents regarding current issues, new policies and projects. The review found that although public consultations had been undertaken for many policies, strategies and developments, a high response rate was not always received. The review resulted in eight recommendations that were approved by Cabinet in November 2022 and aimed to increase use a wide variety of methods of consulting with residents.

## Principle C – Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits

### Sources of Assurance

Source of Assurance	Developments in 2022/23
Defining Outcomes	
Corporate Plan	
Performance and action monitoring	Programme Management Group monitors key Corporate Plan Projects quarterly by theme through Highlight Reporting.
Risk Management Framework	
Risk Appetite Statement 2021	
Sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits	
Medium Term Financial Plan – Capital Programme and Investment Strategy	
Records of key Cabinet decisions and supporting materials	
Equality Objectives ensure fair access	
Project Management Toolkit	The toolkit will require updating during 2023/24.

### Other Sources of Assurance

#### *Defining outcomes*

48. The Corporate Plan 2022-2024 is structured around three themes:
- **Green Pioneer** - Our long term aim: Every community and individual plays their part in becoming a carbon neutral borough, through a more sustainable way of life. And the natural environment is protected and enhanced.
  - **Caring Ashford** - Our long term aim: Towns, villages and rural communities are welcoming, safe places for all who live and work in them, offering a high quality of life where everyone is valued and respected.
  - **Targeted Growth** - Our long term aim: A thriving, productive local economy supporting a range of business and industry offering good work to local people and is recognised as a high quality visitor destination.
49. These along with the council's principles are all geared towards achieving the Ashford Ambition.

50. Monitoring of the council's Corporate Plan projects is undertaken through quarterly highlight reporting to the Programme Management Group. The group meets on a monthly basis and each meeting focuses on a different theme within the Corporate Plan. Project managers are required to complete a Highlight report which provides a summary of the overall status of their project and also includes detail of the budgetary position, risks and plans for the future.

***Sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits***

51. The council has a planned programme of projects which recognises the need for flexibility. These projects are brought together in the Corporate Plan action plan which sets out all the activities that will contribute towards delivering our objectives. The programme is overseen by the council's Programme Management Group and Regeneration, Infrastructure and Improvement Board.
52. A project management toolkit brings together a variety of tools to assist project managers in maximising the economic, social and environmental benefits of projects. The toolkit includes business case and project inception template, action logs, risks assessment guidance and project review documents for all project managers to use. A number of changes have taken place during 2022/23 which mean that the toolkit requires updating. This includes changes to our Section 106 Process and the need for digital projects to be scoped differently. In light of this, it is suggested that the toolkit be reviewed and changes communicated.

**Key improvement area 3: The Project Management Toolkit should be updated to reflect the changes in the council's governance arrangements.**



**Principle D – determining interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes.**

**Sources of Assurance**

Source of Assurance	Developments in 2022/23
Determining interventions	
Cabinet reports include options appraisals	
Medium-Term Financial Plan	
Directors Meeting	
Director Service Sessions	
Programme Management Group	A new agenda template was adopted in November 2022, which aimed to focus on a particular Corporate Plan theme at each meeting.
Commercial and Digital Board	
Cabinet Forward Planning Sessions	
<a href="#">Council's transparency page</a>	
Planning and programming Interventions	
Recovery Plan	
Cabinet forward plan	
Risk management Framework	
Internal Audit	Audit review of the council's approach to Section 106 was conducted.
Scrutiny Reviews	The Overview and Scrutiny Task Group reviewed the council's Section 106 Process.
Service planning aligns budgets, plans and objectives	
Communications Strategy	
Business Continuity Plans	
Emergency Plan	The KRF has conducted an Audit of itself and is looking to re-structure as a

	result of these findings.
Business Continuity Incident Management Team	
Weekly Policy Update	
Remote Working Policy	Remote Working Applications are being rolled out during the year.
Management Team Annual Programme	
Corporate Policy Tracker	It is proposed that a tracker is developed to store all council policies to ensure they are reviewed and updated regularly.
Optimising achievement of intended outcomes	
Procurement Strategy includes Social Value	The policy has been drafted and is due to be piloted during 2023.
Budget Scrutiny Task Group	
Appraisals	
Corporate Training Programme	
Personal Development Training	
Public consultation on Draft Budget	

## **Other Sources of Assurance**

### ***Determining Interventions***

53. Following the council's senior management restructure in May 2022, it was decided that the council's Directors would meet on a weekly basis, to consider strategic issues and respond to performance and risks and changing circumstances as they emerge in an agile way. Director Service Sessions are also held on a quarterly basis for Directors to discuss individual service performance, current budget management, staff sickness and training as well as note any celebrations or successes.
54. During November 2022, it was agreed that the agenda format of the Programme Management Group meetings would change to ensure that updates to key corporate projects were communicated. Project managers are asked to produce quarterly highlight reports regarding projects in their service and each meeting focuses on a different theme in the Corporate Plan; Caring Ashford, Targeted Growth and Green Pioneer.

### ***Planning and programming interventions***

55. During 2021/22, the Mid Kent Audit Partnership completed an audit of the council's Section 106 process to test the controls in place against risks including the recording of planning obligations, trigger points being missed, the release and spend of monies in a timely way and how monies were spent. The Audit Committee has received updates on the audit outcomes and good progress has been made in responding to the recommendations outlined by the Partnership and 12 out of 15 of them have been actioned so far. Three actions are outstanding pending further improvements to the new Arcus planning software launched in the summer in order to fully enable the monitoring functionality. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee also conducted a review of the Section 106 processes during 2022 and eight recommendations for improving them were approved in November 2021. The recommendations from the review are being progressed within the Planning and Development Service, and the Committee are monitoring this.
56. Now that hybrid working has been fully embedded, Human Resources have identified a need to document informal arrangements in place between employees and line managers through a Remote Working Application. This will ensure that the operational needs of the organisation are being met whilst allowing flexible arrangements to continue. Guidelines around remote working have also been communicated during the year around the number of days an employee should work in the office and the importance of having face to face team meetings on occasion.
57. The Council has an extensive list of corporate policies that require reviewing every few years to ensure they are up to date. For example, some policies will need to be updated in line with changes to legislation. It is proposed that a corporate policy tracker is developed to ensure that all policies are stored in a central place which the Council's Management Team can oversee regularly and remind Services of upcoming review dates.

**Key improvement area 4: A Corporate Policy Tracker is created to store all of the council's policies to ensure they are reviewed and kept updated.**

### ***Optimising achievement of intended outcomes***

58. In response to the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2021, a Social Value Policy has been drafted setting out our approach for how the council's procurement activities will improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the Borough. This has been formulated within the context of the Overarching Contract Standing Orders which guides our Procurement and Contracts Awards. The policy is due to be trialled internally during 2023 to test its suitability, with a view to adopting it the following year.

**Principle E – Developing the entity’s capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it.**

**Sources of Assurance**

Source of Assurance	Developments in 2022/23
Developing the entity’s capacity	
Roadmap meetings	
Corporate Business Meeting	
Organisational Restructures	From 1 <sup>st</sup> April 2022, the council implemented a senior management restructure to help deliver the objectives outlined in the Corporate Plan.
Directors Meetings	
Director Service Sessions	
Programme Management Group	Regular highlight reports are produced for key corporate projects.
Developing the capability of the entity’s leadership and other individuals	
Executive Leader of the Council Briefings	

***Developing the entity’s capacity***

The council regularly reviews its resourcing needs and structures it has in place so that defined outcomes are achieved effectively and efficiently. From 1st April 2022, a new senior management structure was implemented to help deliver the council’s ambitious Corporate Plan. Following consultation with staff and the council’s Joint Consultative Committee, the new structure increased capacity at a strategic level. It has also introduced service areas that best fit the delivery of the Corporate Plan whilst encouraging cross-organisational working across programmes including digital, carbon reduction and commercialisation.

59. As part of the council’s digital programme, a new planning IT system was adopted in summer 2022. As the new system was considered a large scale transformation project, a lessons learnt report was compiled internally to understand what learning can be taken forward into future IT projects. Additionally, a scrutiny review was also conducted by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee during later 2022 to examine how the planning system was delivered. The review highlighted that more governance was required when delivering large projects and plans are being developed to ensure that greater monitoring takes place throughout project delivery and ensure lessons learnt are applied to future IT projects.

<b><u>Key improvement area 4: A Corporate Policy Tracker is created to store all of the council's policies to ensure they are reviewed and kept updated.</u></b>
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***Developing the capability of the entity's leadership and other individuals***

60. Members had the opportunity to attend regular training sessions and briefings on relevant topics and are detailed in the Member Training Annual Report 2021/22. In addition to normal training sessions held during the year, Members also were invited to attend training on an individual basis and examples this year include KCC Community Services Consultation, the new Waste Contract and a presentation on the budget.
61. Ahead of the local elections that will take place on 4 May 2023, a comprehensive induction programme has been developed. In addition to training designed to assist with committee roles including Licensing, Overview and Scrutiny, Planning and Audit training, the induction programme will need to give a rounded view of what to expect when becoming a councillor and how the council serves its residents.
62. After successful programmes in previous years, the Ashford Manager Programme was held again during 2023 to develop the capability of individuals and assist with future succession planning. The course encompassed leading change, strategy, innovation and commercial awareness and provided the opportunity for managers from different services to develop networks and improve their understanding of stakeholders and collaborative working. To complement the programme, a wider suite of management development training has been created to support personal development planning and to prepare staff for future opportunities. The introduction of a more structured 1:1 also encourages discussion about personal development and skills.

**Principle F - Managing Risk and Performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management**

**Sources of Assurance**

Sources of Assurance	Developments in 2022/23
Managing Risk	
Risk management framework	Management Team met in May 2022 to review and update the councils corporate risk register.
Risks regularly considered by Audit Committee and Management Team	
Risk Management Software (Pentana)	
Risk Appetite Statement 2021	
Service Planning	
Managing Performance	
Quarterly performance reporting, including to Overview and Scrutiny	A new suite of KPIs were adopted as part of the Corporate Plan and the council's governance arrangements
Publication of all public committee minutes and agendas	
Robust internal control	
Internal and External Audit plans and reports	
Effective, resourced Internal Audit function	A new Head of Mid Kent Audit was appointed in 5 <sup>th</sup> December 2022
Managing data	
Designated Data Protection Officer	
Data Protection Policy	The Data Protection Policy Suite was reviewed by Cabinet in November 2022 to ensure that it remains relevant and fit for purpose.
Six monthly reporting on data protection issues and freedom of information requests	
GDPR Action Plan	

Data Protection Impact Assessment	
Remote working and portable devices guidance	
Quarterly budget monitoring reports to Cabinet	
Strong public financial management	
Statutory Guidance for Publication of accounts	

### **Other Sources of Assurance**

#### ***Managing Risk and robust internal controls***

63. An overarching review of the council's risk register and risk appetite took place during a dedicated session with the council's Management Team in May 2022. The register and risk appetite were reviewed to ensure that the strategic risks to the delivery of the Corporate Plan were fully captured and managed accordingly. The strategic risk register and risk appetite are reviewed quarterly by the council's Management Team but will also be refreshed in 2024 in line with preparing the next Corporate Plan.
64. The draft budget proposals for the 2023/24 year included a savings programme of £1.42m. In order to close the year's budget gap and to reduce the draw on reserves, it is imperative that the council deliver the recommended savings programme over the next few years and close the financial deficit within the council's Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP). It has been agreed that the council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee will monitor the delivery of savings targets through regular reporting.

**Key Improvement Area 5: To ensure that the council puts in a place governance arrangements for monitoring the delivery of its savings programme for 2023/24 to close the financial deficit within the council's MTFP.**

#### ***Managing Performance***

65. During 2022, the council's performance framework was extended to include business intelligence reporting to inform service delivery and resource allocation. For example, the Welfare Advisory Group used an interactive dashboard to identify where people could be vulnerable to the cost of living crisis, to inform where support should be provided. The Borough Profile has

also been produced in a dashboard format and provides demographic information to provide a picture of our local area.

### ***Managing Data***

66. The importance of data protection continues to be communicated across the organisation with regular information by way of a blog on the council's Intranet and Smart Hub.
67. Over the course of 2022/23, a review of our data protection policies and procedures took place. The Data Protection Policy has been updated, privacy notices reviewed and Records of Processing Activity updated, and particularly took into account departmental structure changes, tasks and activities.
68. Additionally, six monthly updates are provided to the council's Management Team to summarise any data protection issues and the number of freedom of information that have arisen during the six month period.

### ***Strong public financial management***

69. The council is required to follow statutory guidance for the publication of its accounts. Each year, this guidance is reviewed and updated, and this is reported to the Audit Committee. This informs members of any updates on the council's accounts and on the lessons learnt from the preceding year.



**Principle G – Implementing good practice in transparency, reporting and audit to deliver effective accountability**

**Sources of Assurance**

Sources of Assurance	Developments in 2022/23
Implementing good practice in transparency	
Annual Report	
Accessible website	
Transparency page	
Publications Scheme	
Implementing good practice in reporting	
Annual Report	The Council participated in the procurement of its new External Auditor for the Audit year 23/24 with Grant Thornton being reappointed by PSAA.
Annual financial statements	
Annual Governance Statement	
Corporate committee template	
Internal Audit function	
Assurance and effective accountability	
Head of Internal Audit	New Head of Internal Audit appointed in 5th December 2022
Six-monthly update on governance exemptions to Audit Committee	

**Other Sources of Assurance**

***Implementing good practice in transparency***

70. The council has a continued commitment to transparency and meeting relevant legislative requirements. Data published under the Governments Transparency Code is available on the transparency pages of the website. These data sets include council spending, salaries, fraud outcomes and the gender pay gap.
71. The Transparency pages also explain the Publication Scheme which details the different classes of information that are routinely made available; Freedom of Information, Environmental Information and Subject Access Requests. Also

available, is a comprehensive list of the council's policies and strategies which govern the way in which members and staff operate.

### ***Implementing good practice in reporting***

72. Reports to the council's committees are consistently presented through the use of a corporate committee template. The template ensures that due consideration is given to relevant factors to inform decision makers including equalities impact, financial implications, risks, carbon neutrality and consultation.
73. The Internal Audit function for the Council is delivered through the Mid Kent Audit Partnership, a 4-way shared service with Maidstone, Swale and Tunbridge Wells councils. The Audit Partnership provides internal audit, consultancy, and advisory support to the council, and delivers a programme of work (an audit plan) each year.
74. Based upon the audit assessment provided by the Head of Audit, Ashford Borough Council has adequate management, control and governance processes in place to manage the achievement of their objectives.

### **How effective is our governance in meeting these principles?**

75. The assurances noted above – both the component 'sources' and the other developments made within the year – provided a comprehensive overview of the council's governance framework. **Generally these arrangements work well and allow the council to uphold good standards of accountability and effectiveness.**

### **Part 3: planned changes to governance areas in 2023/24**

76. We do not consider that there have been any significant governance issues arising in 2022/23. However the actions detailed below are in place to maintain good governance arrangements throughout 2023/24.

77. These are in bold within the report, with a short action plan summarised below:

	<b>Governance Area</b>	<b>Responsible</b>	
1.	Changes to the Constitution should be track changed and presented to Full Council annually for formal approval.	Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer	May 2023
2.	To explore alternative ways of consulting with residents regarding the draft budget proposals for 2024/25.	Head of Policy and Performance  Service Lead Finance	November 2023
3.	The Project Management Toolkit should be updated to reflect the changes in the council's governance arrangements.	Head of Policy and Performance	September 2023
4.	A Corporate Policy Tracker is created to store all of the council's policies to ensure they are reviewed and kept updated.	Head of Policy and Performance	May 2023
5.	To ensure that the council puts in place governance arrangements for monitoring the delivery of its savings programme for 2023/24 to close the financial deficit within the council's MTFP.	Service Lead Finance	May 2024

78. Through further action during 2023/24 in the areas noted on the previous page, the council's overall governance arrangements will remain strong – and indeed will strengthen further.

79. These developments will be reported on to the Audit Committee during the year ahead, and will be considered fully within the next Annual Governance Statement.