

Agenda Item No: 11
Report To: Cabinet
Date of Meeting: 13 September 2018
Report Title: LGA Peer Challenge
Report Author & Job Title: Will Train
Senior Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Portfolio Holder: Cllr. Gerry Clarkson
(Leader of the council)



Summary: In April 2018 the council welcomed a team of councillors and senior officers from Local Government Association member authorities to complete a peer challenge of the council's corporate governance.

The final report of the peer challenge team gives high praise to the council's approach, ambition and impact, stating that "Ashford Borough Council has a clear expression of corporate priorities set out in its Corporate Plan. Working to these priorities there is strong, passionate and purposeful leadership driving the organisation forward and getting things done". The report also notes that the Big 8 projects and the regeneration of Ashford town centre would not have been achieved without the council's leading and dynamic role.

The peer challenge team spent four days at the Council, during which they spoke to more than 90 people including councillors, staff, external partners and stakeholders and their final report makes 10 key recommendations to the council.

Key Decision: YES

Significantly Affected Wards: None

Recommendations: **The Cabinet is recommended to:-**

- I. Note the final report and recommendations of the peer challenge and approve publication of the report (appendix 1);**
- II. Approve the peer challenge action plan (appendix 2);**
- III. Allocate a budget of £150,000 for accelerated delivery of the Digital Transformation Programme;**
- IV. Delegate authority to the Chief Executive to approve the detailed spend of the £150,000 allocation**

Policy Overview:	Through its membership of the Local Government Association (LGA), the council is offered a fully funded peer challenge every four to five years. This offer includes a light touch follow-up visit expected to occur within two years of the initial visit.
Financial Implications:	An allocation of £150,000 is sought to further delivery of the council's Digital Transformation Programme. The LGA peer challenge and follow up visit are fully funded by the LGA and offered at no cost to the council.
Legal Implications	N/A
Equalities Impact Assessment	The LGA recommendations relate to the council's governance, delivery capacity and collaborative arrangements and do not propose any actions with an equalities impact. Points within the action plan will be assessed individually for their impact on equalities as they are progressed.
Other Material Implications:	The peer challenge process includes a light tough follow up visit, expected to occur within two years of the original visit. In response to this, the majority of actions within the action plan are intended to be underway or complete within the next 18-24 months.
Exempt from Publication:	NO
Background Papers:	None
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Report Title: LGA Peer Challenge

The Peer Challenge process

1. As a member organisation of the Local Government Association (LGA), the council is offered a fully funded peer challenge every four to five years. The peer challenge is not an inspection by the LGA, but is an improvement focused process tailored to a council's individual needs, utilising the experience and knowledge of local government held by the peer challenge team to feedback on the council's approach and processes.
2. The peer challenge involves a team of experienced elected councillors and officer peers from LGA member organisations undertaking onsite interviews and discussions with councillors, officers, external partners and stakeholders and assessing key council documents such as the corporate plan, budget and medium term financial plan (MTFP) to inform a series of recommendations focused on ways to strengthen the council's processes, governance and approach.
3. Recent peer challenges undertaken by other Kent authorities include Canterbury (January 2013), Gravesham (October 2013), Sevenoaks (January 2014), Tonbridge and Malling (June 2014), Tunbridge Wells (October 2016), Folkestone and Hythe (June 2018) and Kent County Council (May 2014).
4. Each peer challenge is tailored to the authority requesting a review, however at the core of all corporate peer challenges are five focal points the LGA considers critical to councils' performance and improvement:
 - Understanding of the local place and priority setting
 - Leadership of Place
 - Organisational leadership and governance
 - Financial planning and viability
 - Capacity to deliver
5. In addition to these five core components, the council specified additional areas it wanted the peer challenge team to consider and provide feedback on:
 - Management structure and capacity
 - Digital transformation strategy
 - Arrangements for public engagement and consultation
 - Approach to shared services
 - Arrangements for programme management
6. The peer challenge team membership was selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and was agreed with the council. The council would like to extend its thanks to the peer challenge team:
 - John Robinson - Chief Executive, Gedling Borough Council
 - Councillor Andrew Proctor - Leader of Broadland District Council

- Nik Hardy - Head of Economic Growth, Allerdale Borough Council
 - John Skidmore - Director of Corporate Strategy and Commissioning, East Riding of Yorkshire Council
 - Davinder Gill - Programme Manager - Business Transformation and Strategic Commissioning, Cheshire West and Chester Council
 - Josephine Altham - Education Department, Barking and Dagenham LBC (National Graduate Development Programme)
 - Andrew Winfield - Peer Challenge Manager, LGA.
7. The team spent four days at the council, during which they spoke to more than 90 people comprising councillors, staff, external partners and stakeholders including neighbouring authorities, Damian Green MP, Kent County Council, SELEP and key development partners. At the end of each day on site, the team spoke with the Leader and Chief Executive to update on their findings and progress; and presented their findings and recommendations to councillors and officers at the end of their visit.

Findings

8. The peer challenge has shown the council to be effective, ambitious and delivery focused, with the team noting in particular the crucial enabling role and the clear and relentless focus of the council in unlocking development.
9. Feedback from the team recognised the achievements made in securing delivery of the Big 8 projects and the regeneration of Ashford town centre; noting that these would not have been achieved without the council's leading and dynamic role. High praise was also given to the council's approach to housing development and addressing social need, as well as the importance the council has attached to its cultural offer.
10. The team advised that the council demonstrates passion, energy, ambition and tangible delivery that drives action, with widespread appreciation and recognition evident both within the council and external partners that it is a dynamic, delivery focused organisation driving positive changes for residents and businesses.
11. Ashford's approach to service delivery and steps to achieve financial self-sufficiency were noted by the peer challenge team as examples of excellent practice within local government, with several peers advising that they would be taking back examples of Ashford's work to their own authorities to replicate. Above all, the peer team observed that the council was proactive, ambitious and making a significant impact in enabling economic and housing growth for the best interests of its residents and businesses.
12. The peer challenge process is improvement focused and accordingly the team advised of some areas where the council's approach and governance can be strengthened, particularly in regard to the continued challenges around the provision of affordable housing; reconciling the council's ambitions with its capacity to deliver, the development of the digital transformation strategy and the governance of the council's commercial approach.
13. Within its final report (attached to this report as appendix 1) the peer challenge team made 10 key recommendations to the council:

- 1) develop and articulate the place vision for Ashford to incorporate ‘the heartbeat’ and ‘civic pride’ elements that will guide future development, enhance quality of life and consolidate and capitalise on existing and future investment
- 2) strengthen collaborative arrangements with East Kent and wider-Kent councils to galvanise consensus for infrastructure and inward investment to build on the record of growth and to continue this with the benefits to be shared more widely
- 3) review and re-define the respective roles and responsibilities of members and officers and set out how senior members and managers should model expected behaviours. Build in mechanisms for action when such behaviours fall short.
- 4) review and refresh council support for member induction, ahead of the elections scheduled for May 2019, to specify the member role and the requirements/responsibilities that accompany this
- 5) continue to work with Homes England to support housing growth and on the development of the council’s property company, A Better Choice for Property Ltd.
- 6) produce an affordable housing strategy with partners to support a joint approach to developing options for the provision of affordable housing
- 7) clarify the governance structure for commercial activity that shows the inter-relationship of management team, the Cabinet, ERIB, TEB and council trading companies so that these arrangements provide transparency and avoid allegations of conflicts of interest
- 8) review priorities, performance, and allocation of resources in the light of the recent residents’ survey and consider developing a systematic approach to gathering, analysing and using customer feedback
- 9) review and act on how new ideas/urgent priorities/project proposals take away resources and impact on existing priorities and workloads
- 10) consider accelerating the digital transformation programme and investing in dedicated resource to drive this with the objective to release organisational capacity

Action Plan

14. Cabinet and Management Team have developed an action plan for responding to the peer challenge team’s recommendations, which is attached to this report as appendix 2. The action plan captures ongoing initiatives such as the work of the Town Centre Place Making Board and the digital transformation strategy which speak to the recommendations of the peer challenge team, as well as proposing increased joint working with partners and a strengthened focus on programme management and resource planning.

15. As part of its role in reviewing the council's annual governance statement, the Audit Committee will have oversight of the progress made in delivering the action plan, with reports going to the committee on a quarterly basis.
16. Further to recommendation 10 of the peer challenge team, Cabinet approval is sought to allocate a budget of £150,000 for the establishment of a dedicated delivery team for the digital transformation strategy to accelerate the delivery of this project. Cabinet is asked to allocate these funds and to approve a delegation to the Chief Executive to approve the detailed spend of this budget.
17. Initiatives are being developed in response to the peer challenge team's recommendations and the council's action plan, and further requests for funding may come forward as a result of this work.

Digital Delivery

18. As part of the digital transformation strategy delivery to date virtual digital teams are in place throughout the organisation and services are picking up the digital transformation agenda in addition to the 'day job'. Digital transformation objectives are now specified within service plans and the setting of individual digital objectives has been embedded within the staff appraisal process.
19. The work undertaken to date has been very successful in terms of breeding ownership of digital transformation at all levels, however increasing capacity for this function would accelerate the delivery of the transformation agenda, allowing for the improvement of services and the delivery of cost savings. It should be noted that a shift towards increased digital focus for services would not necessarily entail the loss of staff, but may instead eliminate certain recruitment needs going forward.
20. In response to the peer challenge team highlighting the importance of the digital transformation agenda as a means to increase capacity within the organisation, the Digital Transformation Working Group has identified methods to accelerate delivery of the transformation programme through allocation of the requested £150,000 budget to allow the authority to get 'ahead of the game' in terms of digital services. This budget will be used to:
 - Allocate the Customer Service Manager to delivery of the digital transformation for four days per week and backfill the Customer Service Manager role to cover this.
 - Create a new Digital Officer role within the council
 - Build in additional developer capacity in the short term
 - Establish a specific budget to fund the backfilling or co-location of posts by services when developing and embedding digital solutions.
21. Delivery of the council's Digital Transformation Strategy is extremely important in terms of releasing organisational capacity to deliver against the council's aims. The LGA peer challenge team praised the council's ambition and desire to deliver transformative growth in the borough, but noted that capacity was stretched at various points through the authority, and that the

limitations on the council's capacity pose a risk to the delivery of the council's objectives.

Implications and Risk Assessment

22. As stated earlier in the report, the LGA peer challenge is not an inspection, but is an improvement focused review carried out at the request of the council using the experience and expertise of peers within local government. Adoption of the recommendations made by the peer challenge team will demonstrate further the council's desire to continuously improve its service offering and strengthen its internal processes to deliver in the best interests of the Borough's residents and businesses.
23. The peer challenge team recommendations suggest methods to strengthen the governance of the council and improve its capacity to deliver. It is anticipated that adoption of the recommendations and the responses contained within the action plan will contribute to the mitigation of key corporate risks including organisational capacity to deliver.

Equalities Impact Assessment

24. The LGA recommendations relate to the council's governance, delivery capacity and collaborative arrangements and do not propose any actions with an equalities impact. Points within the action plan will be assessed individually for their impact on equalities as they are progressed.

Other Options Considered

25. The council could reject the recommendations of the peer challenge and continue operating without acting on the suggested changes; however this would not address the areas highlighted by the peer challenge team where improvements can be made to the council's governance, delivery capacity and collaborative arrangements.

Reasons for Supporting Option Recommended

26. Adoption of the recommendations made by the LGA peer challenge team and delivery of the points within the accompanying action plan will strengthen the council's governance and provide greater confidence over its capacity to deliver. The dedicated budgetary allocation for delivery of the digital transformation strategy will allow the council to accelerate the transformation of services and thus free up operational capacity and improve service delivery at a faster rate.

Conclusion

27. The LGA peer challenge has demonstrated that the council's approach and ambition are to be commended and represent a strong and successful response to the changing landscape of local government; and the recommendations made by the peer challenge team focus on strengthening the council's processes and governance to further aid delivery of the council's ambitions.

Portfolio Holder's Views

28. The peer challenge report represents a ringing endorsement of Ashford Borough Council's approach to delivering services of the highest quality and securing regeneration and well-managed growth through an ambitious and entrepreneurial approach, whilst keeping council tax at the lowest level in Kent.

29. I would like to thank the members of the LGA team for carrying out the peer challenge and the many Councillors, staff and partners of the council who contributed to the review process.

Cllr G D Clarkson, Leader

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Corporate Peer Challenge **Ashford Borough Council**

16 – 19 April 2018

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Ashford Borough Council (ABC) has a clear expression of corporate priorities set out in its Corporate Plan. These have been informed by resident and business consultation and the priorities of the majority administration. Working to these priorities there is a strong, passionate and purposeful leadership driving the organisation forward and getting things done. The council is currently conducting a survey of residents and businesses to ensure their views inform the next iteration of the council's corporate priorities.

Economic growth is exemplified by the Big 8 projects, prioritised from 2015 in the Corporate Plan; with 'enterprising Ashford: economic investment and growth' the number one priority. The council's establishment of the Ashford Strategic Delivery Board involving senior members and officers, Kent County Council, the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP), the local MP and key partners, has been an important delivery mechanism for the Big 8 – with a number of these projects complete and the remainder imminent. This illustrates the will to deliver and the council's role in convening a board to oversee this.

Ashford is an area of high growth primarily due to its strategic location with high speed rail connections (HS1), from London to mainland Europe via Ashford, with travel time to London of 38 minutes. It also benefits from good infrastructure with the M20 motorway providing important road links; and lower property prices – residential and commercial - than London. This is leading Ashford and the surrounding areas of East Kent to experience high levels of growth with this expected to continue. Ashford had a record 1,522 companies established in the borough in 2017 – the second highest figure in the county. This growth is mirrored in a population increase of 23 per cent from 2001 to 2011 to 126,000 by 2016, with this projected to rise by 31,100 – 24.6 per cent – by 2031.

At the same time the council recognises the importance of maintaining the balance of growth and quality of life. Ashford is a desirable area to live and features strongly in the Halifax Quality of Life survey (top 10 per cent in 2014). This is important for residents but also beneficial as an incentive to attract inward investment and commercial relocation.

The council is proactive, ambitious and making a significant impact in enabling economic and housing growth for the best interests of its residents and businesses. The political leadership is clear and focused on what it wants to achieve and is well supported by the managerial leadership. There is plenty of evidence that the council is a significant contributor to the substantial economic and housing growth taking place, much of which would not have been achieved or taken place as quickly without the council's leadership and intervention.

However, the scale of ambition and the pace of delivery is having an impact on some parts of the council feeling stretched and under pressure. This will be an area to monitor. At the same time political ambition has meant that on occasions, member and officer boundaries have become blurred and members have strayed into areas outside their remit. These boundaries will need to be reinforced by political and managerial leaders modelling the behaviours that are required and by joint action where these are breached.

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High levels of growth brings pressures including, for example: the provision of housing, especially affordable housing; infrastructure; developing the skills needed for the future economy; and place-shaping so that growth meets the requirements and needs of Ashford rather than uncontrolled development. Addressing these pressures will require a shift of emphasis by the council and developing an increasingly collaborative approach with key partners to lobby for funding and other support.

This shift is beginning with the council keen to refocus growth so that in the future this is seen to be more about developing the 'heartbeat' and 'civic pride' across the borough. This will be vital to consolidate and shape future growth and the place of Ashford; not only as an area that residents and businesses enjoy but that also supports inward investment persuaded by the quality of life on offer. This vision is shared by a small number of members and senior officers but it will be important to develop and articulate this into a clear narrative and share within the council and outside with partners.

The opportunity will be to align this vision to the emerging Local Plan expected to be adopted by the end of the calendar year and to the intention to produce an economic growth strategy and an Ashford Town Centre Framework within the same timeframe.

The council's finances are sound and there are no major savings pressures over the term of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP). This is a firm resource platform for the council to plan ahead.

In addition the council is developing good levels of commercial activity. The A Better Choice for Property housing company is generating income returns on investment with this currently focused on a portfolio of properties let as private rented sector housing. This not only meets a local housing need but also generates an income to assist the council objective to operate free of government grant.

A range of delivery models are being used to meet housing need. In doing this it has notably persuaded government to relax the HRA debt cap to build more housing and is currently looking for this to be extended further. However, provision of affordable housing remains a challenge, despite a good record of delivery. The council continues to develop options and relationships with partners to address this and Homes England are keen to build on the already strong relationship with the council.

The council has done well to anticipate senior level changes – due to retirement and other factors – and to take steps to prepare for this by succession planning. This includes the council's leadership programme; which an estimated 40 managers went through with a number of these since assuming senior manager positions.

Perhaps not surprising for a council with high levels of energy and ambition there are a number of pressure points that indicate either resources are not sufficient to deliver and/or priority demands are overloading parts of the organisation. This was evident to the peer team from all staff meetings conducted onsite and by the evident growth in the number of projects, where it was not always clear what comparative priority each held. The emphasis on projects was described by many as being the principal council focus; often detracting from the 'day job' and services. It will be important for senior members and managers to monitor these pressures, review the effectiveness of programme/project management arrangements and to ensure that resources are sufficient to deliver on ambition.

2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

- 1) develop and articulate the place vision for Ashford to incorporate 'the heartbeat' and 'civic pride' elements that will guide future development, enhance quality of life and consolidate and capitalise on existing and future investment
- 2) strengthen collaborative arrangements with East Kent and wider-Kent councils to galvanise consensus for infrastructure and inward investment to build on the record of growth and to continue this with the benefits to be shared more widely
- 3) review and re-define the respective roles and responsibilities of members and officers and set out how senior members and managers should model expected behaviours. Build in mechanisms for action when such behaviours fall short.
- 4) review and refresh council support for member induction, ahead of the elections scheduled for May 2019, to specify the member role and the requirements/responsibilities that accompany this
- 5) continue to work with Homes England to support housing growth and on the development of the council's property company, A Better Choice for Property Ltd.
- 6) produce an affordable housing strategy with partners to support a joint approach to developing options for the provision of affordable housing
- 7) clarify the governance structure for commercial activity that shows the inter-relationship of management team, the Cabinet, ERIB, TEB and council trading companies so that these arrangements provide transparency and avoid allegations of conflicts of interest
- 8) review priorities, performance, and allocation of resources in the light of the recent residents' survey and consider developing a systematic approach to gathering, analysing and using customer feedback
- 9) review and act on how new ideas/urgent priorities/project proposals take away resources and impact on existing priorities and workloads
- 10) consider accelerating the digital transformation programme and investing in dedicated resource to drive this with the objective to release organisational capacity

Summary of the peer challenge approach

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge.

Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Ashford Borough Council were:

- John Robinson - Chief Executive, Gedling Borough Council
- Councillor Andrew Proctor - Leader of Broadland District Council
- Nik Hardy - Head of Economic Growth, Allerdale Borough Council
- John Skidmore - Director of Corporate Strategy and Commissioning, East Riding of Yorkshire Council
- Davinder Gill - Programme Manager - Business Transformation and Strategic Commissioning, Cheshire West and Chester Council
- Josephine Altham - Education Department, Barking and Dagenham LBC (National Graduate Development Programme)
- Andrew Winfield - Peer Challenge Manager, LGA.

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges. These are the areas we believe are critical to councils' performance and improvement:

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. Leadership of Place: does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. Organisational leadership and governance: is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?
4. Financial planning and viability: does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
5. Capacity to deliver: is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

In addition to these questions, the council also asked the peer team to consider/review/provide feedback on its:

- management structure and capacity
- digital transformation strategy
- arrangements for public engagement and consultation
- approach to shared services
- arrangements for programme management.

In addressing the above bullet points these have been picked up under the five principal corporate peer challenge themes.

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focused and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material they read.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 4 days onsite at Ashford, during which they spoke to more than 90 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders. In addition they gathered information and views from more than 35 meetings, visits and additional research and reading.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of the on-site visit on Thursday 19 April. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things the council is already addressing and progressing.

3. Feedback

3.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

The council recognises the particular advantages of Ashford's strategic location and has maximised this to enable significant economic and housing growth. The council's Corporate Plan sets out clear priorities for growth and politicians and officers have a sound understanding of local needs. This has been informed by customer consultation by a residents' survey conducted prior to the last administration in 2014, which was used to identify public priorities.

A further residents' survey is currently being conducted with 10,000 postal questionnaires issued across the borough. The results from this will be used to

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inform the setting of corporate priorities for the next five years and the council is also encouraged to consider using the results as a performance management tool, for example, the setting of customer satisfaction targets for front-line services. The data provides valuable information on customer satisfaction with services provided and can act as an indicator of service concerns. For example, the council recognises that feedback can provide a valuable insight into customer attitudes and behaviours on recycling, work on the council's key projects and inform the planned work on the Town Centre Framework.

This survey information, supplemented by data from other sources, offers a rich resource for more detailed analysis, for example by linking this to demographic data, social factors, population and consumer behaviour to provide a more detailed understanding of service impact and customer needs down to ward and postcode levels. There are examples where other councils have used this information to produce ward profiles and to develop detailed analyses of local issues that assist discussion on the best forms of action and intervention. The peer team recommend that ABC review and act upon the results of the recent residents' survey and use this resource to develop a systematic approach to gathering, analysing and using customer feedback.

The benefits of strengthening resident communication include closing off the feedback loop – “you said and we did” - and builds communication channels with residents and businesses to show the council listens to feedback and what it is planning ahead for. ABC intends to produce a quarterly residents' magazine from April 2018 and this will be a valuable step forward in communicating what the council has achieved, what it has planned and to promote dialogue on those issues on which a decision is yet to be made.

Ashford's strategic location and attraction to inward investment is being effectively exploited and its priorities and actions, particularly for housing and economic growth, are aligned to local, regional and national priorities. Since 2015 this has accelerated to be a clear and relentless focus, particularly on the Big 8 projects. These include the flagship mixed-use leisure town centre development at Elwick Place, the first phase of the Commercial Quarter, the new Ashford College campus and the first phase development at Chilmington Green with overall delivery of 5,750 homes. The Big 8 schemes have attracted £520m of inward investment.

The enabling role of the council in this has been crucial. For example, it has: underwritten the cost of two floors of the new development at the Commercial Quarter; provided forward funding of £42m for the development of Elwick Place; brought forward the development of Ashford College through grant funding of £3m; contributed funding towards the Jn. 10A works on the M20 motorway; and acquired the Park Mall shopping centre as a key regeneration project to upgrade the centre with a refreshed retail offer. These outcomes would not have been achieved without the council's leading and dynamic role. The peer team and feedback from some partners, considered Ashford's role in enabling growth to be an exemplar for others in local government.

While focused on physical growth, the council shows an understanding of social need with the example of the Chilmington Green development where it insisted on higher space standards so that homes could expand to accommodate family growth. A different example, recognising the importance of establishing broadband

connectivity, is the intention to require all new developments above 10 units to have high speed fibre broadband connections to the property.

The council recognises the importance of its cultural offer to add depth and colour to the range of facilities available for residents, to enhance the quality of life and to form part of the inward investment 'offer'. Planning discussions for the town include a cultural hub and a restaurant quarter. The council has a dedicated cultural services team involved in a range of activity. The peer team were impressed with the public art trail of giant Snowdog sculptures planned for 10 weeks in the autumn of 2018. Their purpose is to inspire civic pride and also raise money for a local charity.

The council demonstrates passion, energy, ambition and tangible delivery that drives action. The council is known for being 'open for business' and is at the cutting edge in terms of housing and economic growth. There is a widespread appreciation and recognition, both within the council and outside from partners, that it is a dynamic, delivery focused organisation driving positive change for residents and businesses. This is a council that knows what it wants to do and gets on with doing it.

Developing a future vision for Ashford – the town and the borough – will be important. Senior members and officers describe the next phase of Ashford's transformation as being to develop "the heartbeat" and "civic pride". This will be important to consolidate the rapid growth experienced over 20 years. Consolidation provides an opportunity to define the future form of growth and the underpinning elements that will characterise the area, for example: design features specific to Ashford; public realm provision to enhance the environment; the cultural offer to enrich the lives of residents; the leisure offer; and the flow of activity that will shape Ashford town centre.

However, this transformation vision for Ashford is not widely understood and needs to be developed and articulated into a coherent plan of action "moving into a new phase of growth, living, leisure and lifestyle". The opportunity is to align this to key strategies planned for adoption during 2018. These include: the emerging Local Plan (2011-2030); the proposed Ashford Town Centre Framework; and an economic growth strategy. It will be important that these strategies cross refer and form the means for defining the future place of Ashford and how this will be delivered.

In developing this it will also be important to ensure that the benefits of growth are inclusive, for example to include: rural/urban community needs, skills development, the needs of deprived communities etc. to improve the life chances of those most vulnerable so that no-one is left behind. This will be a difficult agenda and one that must involve other principal partners, for example SELEP, Ashford College, Kent County Council etc.

The council will also need to continue to exploit the international offer of Ashford town centre, something that it is alive to. Ashford has and is undergoing significant development and is reaching a point where it will soon have a considerable offer to make to potential European investors and possibly visitors. Other external factors, for example Brexit, the national economy and interest rates etc. will need to be taken into account but it is unquestionable that Ashford town will have a significant offer to make and this should be on its terms to complement what is currently in place and planned.

3.2 Leadership of Place

The council sees itself as pushing forward in the best interests of Ashford and is exercising clout and influence locally, regionally and nationally. It is generating substantial private and public sector investment and is positioning Ashford on the map nationally in terms of what it has achieved on growth and on the offer it is able to make to potential inward investors. This was confirmed by local and regional partners and the local MP.

The council leads locally and responds quickly and boldly to needs and opportunities. A good example was the quick response to be actively involved in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Re-settlement programme with the council deciding in 2015 to re-settle up to 50 refugees a year to 2020. This action was commended by the Home Secretary. On a more local note, the council took the decision to remove charges for burial costs for any resident under the age of 18 years in 2017, well ahead of the government announcement in March 2018 that child burial fees in England would be waived.

The council is creatively developing options to meet the housing needs of residents. Housing is a priority with the Corporate Plan setting out the objective of 'quality housing and homes for all'. The council manages a housing stock of around 5,500 homes. It successfully bid in 2014 for dispensation to increase its HRA debt cap and is proposing a further debt cap uplift of £22m to enable the building of 108 homes.

Another option model was an innovative scheme, involving private sector funding, for the development of an independent living scheme at Repton Park funded by Cheyne Capital – an investment management company. ABC will manage this facility, with supported housing costs deducted from rental income. The scheme will operate on a 40 year lease with the property to then be sold to the council for £1.

To address the needs of an ageing population the council invested £16m on a dementia-friendly redevelopment of its sheltered housing scheme at Farrow Court. This provides 104 homes including apartments (one and two bedrooms), seven recuperative care flats, one guest room and 12 purpose-built flats for adults with learning disabilities. The partnership involved KCC, health providers and Age UK working with the council. This is not only an important facility for an ageing population but also a valuable resource to support secondary care providers to relieve the 'bed blocking' pressures in hospitals.

A separate initiative is the A Better Choice Lettings and Property Management (ABC Lettings) agency that assists the council to prevent homelessness and discharge its housing duty. It covers Ashford and Shepway, manages 133 properties and provides a guaranteed rent and tenant assurance for landlords.

The council is working well with partners to deliver affordable housing but despite this has not been able to meet the challenging target of 368 affordable homes set out in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA). The council is giving active consideration to increasing affordable housing delivery and the opportunities for delivery by: working more closely with registered providers (RPs), joint ventures with RPs and/or councils, developing institutional investment opportunities, municipal bonds, building through its housing company etc. One option that is being considered is a 'rent to buy' scheme operating through a special purpose vehicle (SPV) that would purchase property through s.106 affordable housing allocations.

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The modelling work on this option indicates a return on investment (ROI) in the order of 6 per cent but with the benefit of providing housing at an affordable rent with a purchase option for the tenant.

Housing is moving quickly up the government agenda and being pushed through Homes England. Areas with significant affordability issues are prioritised, Ashford fulfils this criterion through its comparatively high housing cost ratio of 13:1 average housing price to average salary. This provides an opportunity worth building on to work with Homes England on housing delivery and also to identify potential sites for housing. Homes England offered to work with the council to support housing growth and on the development of its property company, A Better Choice for Property.

Partners are glowingly positive in their work with ABC. Particularly about the council making growth happen and helping to remove barriers. There were many quotes gathered that reinforced this, including: “Ashford is the place to be”; “it punches above its weight”; “never had a relationship with a council like it”; “the council is leading in Kent and others are following”; “Ashford has always stepped up”. Just as important as the relationships is the recognition that the council will deliver on its priorities and this provides partners with increased certainty and confidence when making investment decisions.

A key partner for ABC is Kent County Council (KCC) with whom the council entered into a District Deal in 2016 – the only deal of its kind in the county. This has been instrumental in securing infrastructure funding, for example to provide a signalling solution at Ashford International railway station for the next generation of Eurostar trains; for Jn. 10a of the M20; a Chilmington protocol to support the delivery of infrastructure; and the Ashford Developers Group where KCC secured developer funding to enable delivery of a highways project to provide increased traffic capacity in support of planned development. This deal will be important in the future and could be developed further to work on ‘soft’ infrastructure needs, for example housing and support needs for an ageing population, skills development and support for more vulnerable sections of the community.

However, the council will need to avoid a perception of being viewed as an island within the county. Such a perception might be formed from the experience of the East Kent councils’ proposal to form a single council, from which Ashford withdrew, and the record of shared services where the council can be perceived as a reluctant partner unless there are clear and compelling benefits. Although neighbouring councils understand the need for ABC to put its “best interests first”, the perception of it working alone could be damaging for strategic collaborative working. The District Deal recognises ABC’s pivotal role, “Ashford’s role will continue to grow as an important and vibrant commercial centre between London and the continent... [and] Ashford is in many ways the gateway to East Kent and its strongest engine for growth.” Collaborative working on strategic issues will become increasingly important for Kent councils to work together.

The government’s Industrial Strategy (Nov. 2017) highlights the importance of strategic leadership:

“Successful strategies require strong public and private leadership. We will continue to work with the new city region mayors, combined authorities, local authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships to drive growth in England. We will continue to support locally-driven partnerships, proposals and reforms,

with the aim of ensuring that economic powers are exercised at the most appropriate level and that decision-making is effective and clear.”

ABC should consider strengthening collaborative arrangements beyond Ashford on the premise that it is acknowledged as the economic growth hub for East Kent. The government appears to favour strategic planning arrangements with the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) expected to incorporate a ‘duty to agree’ to focus on strategic issues. It will become increasingly important for Ashford and East Kent councils to galvanise a consensus for strategic infrastructure, housing and inward investment to build on the record of growth, plans for how this may continue and sharing the benefits.

3.3 Organisational leadership and governance

There is a strong, passionate and purposeful political leadership driving the organisation forward and getting things done. This is an inclusive outlook that involves monthly Group Leaders’ meetings to discuss upcoming issues, along with regular member briefings in advance of Cabinet and council meetings to update on issues such as the Local Plan, Homelessness Reduction Act etc. There is a Cabinet of 9 portfolio holders with each of these having a deputy. This not only extends political involvement in Cabinet but is also providing a resource for it to do its work. Members appreciate the open approach and access created by the Leader and leading opposition members value the open, constructive and regular dialogue.

Energetic, passionate and effective political and managerial leadership is clearly evident at the council. The Leader brings a lot of energy and ideas and is supported by the Chief Executive to form a strong leadership team. The political direction was described by staff to the peer team as “trusting, open, collaborative, receptive”.

Overview and Scrutiny is valued with open conversations are held. It is non-political – chaired by members from opposition groups - and contributes to the work of the council. For example recent reviews have covered health infrastructure, air quality, youth engagement, housing and safeguarding and involved external partners.

The organisation is being driven forward with energy and real pace delivering significant benefits, from a committed, dedicated and hardworking council team. The Directors and Management Team have a well-structured Forward Plan to anticipate issues coming up. Members and senior officers have positive relationships and officers value members talking to staff at all levels. The ambition of the council, and its ‘can do’ outlook, is very exciting for many staff who see this as liberating and empowering them to deliver.

Communications are effective to inform staff of corporate priorities and emerging issues. These include a monthly magazine ‘Root and Branch’; Chief Executive walkabouts, and key management team messages cascaded down the organisation by heads of service. This work is supported by the process of producing service plans to guide individual and team activity and the personal development frameworks to review individual performance and identify training needs.

However, as an ambitious organisation, open to taking on new commitments, it is not surprising that some service areas and staff feel under great pressure with the emphasis on projects, often at the expense of day-to-day services. It was clear from meeting members that they recognise staff are under real pressure. ABC will need

to exercise care to align resources with priorities, to deliver ambition, with greater consideration given on how new ideas/projects impact on existing priorities and workloads.

At the same time the recent staff wellbeing survey identifies issues that need an urgent council response and staff will need to see that this is being acted upon. The peer team were told of a number of instances where some members raised concerns directly with more junior staff which for some was intimidating. This is a practice that must end. In future it will be important that members' concerns are addressed directly with the heads of service to support timely understanding, resolution and minimise negative tensions.

While it will be important to maintain member enthusiasm and involvement in the life of the council there is a need to respect member and officer boundaries which, in a number of instances, have become blurred. Members and senior managers will need to ensure that these boundaries are understood and not breached. It would be preferable for senior members and managers to model the behaviours that should operate and jointly take action when necessary. If this does not address the issues then the council should consider a joint member/officer study to understand these issues, how they should be dealt with, and leading to the production of a more formal working protocol.

The member induction role could be beneficially strengthened by being more structured and detailed to provide new members with a much stronger appreciation of the role of a member and respective boundaries. There is an opportunity for the council to address this ahead of and ready for the local elections in May 2019 by reviewing member induction to specify the member role and the requirements/responsibilities that accompany this.

Finally, the council adopted in 2017 its values of Ambitious, Creative and Trustworthy (ACT). It is still in the process of embedding these through training and communication. This will be important to continue, particularly in relation to the issue of behaviours described above. It would be beneficial to link this with the 'our people, behaviours' framework, which includes the behaviour group 'how we work with others'.

3.4 Financial planning and viability

The council enjoys a healthy financial position with no major pressures in the immediate future. The financial pressures caused by cuts to Revenue Support Grant (RSG) have been met by successfully saving £1.6m since 2014. Similarly there is a strong level of reserves with a willingness to borrow if and when needed. Effective use is made of internal borrowing by 'cash flowing' for non-income generating projects, where transfers from reserves can finance such commitments. This healthy financial position is important to provide a firm basis for planning ahead.

Good use is made of New Homes Bonus (NHB) – currently amounting to £2.69m for 2018-19, rising to more than £3m in following years - with a 50:50 allocation to the revenue budget and projects. ABC is aware of the uncertainty of longer-term NHB funding and that this could change/come to an end but would be able to cope if that were to happen.

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The council benefits from good collection rates for Council Tax and Business rates being higher than the national average at 99 per cent. This points to good practice in the revenues and benefits service and contributes to certainty in the revenues that the council can gather and allocate for service provision.

ABC has an open outlook to income generation with good levels of risk assessment, and business case evaluation, before commitments are made. Income generation is important to support the revenue budget but also to meet the council's aim to be financially self-sufficient. These streams are projected to generate income of £1.1m for 2018-19 and to increase to £2.84m by 2022-23; with the council's confidence such that these figures are built into the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP). However, it is currently difficult to see the detail of commercial income in the MTFP, as all income is lumped into a single figure. There would benefit in breaking this down to provide more detail.

A Better Choice For Property company was established in 2013 as a council trading company to acquire a portfolio of properties to let at market rents. As well as providing an important income stream it is also addressing a local need for private rented sector (PRS) housing and is an example of commercial activity both deriving an income stream and working to a corporate/local priority. The council's intention is for the housing company to acquire a portfolio of 300-500 homes between 2018-2023, with loans of £79m proposed for the period 2018-21. Ashford's full council had previously approved a £10m loan facility for the company, since increased to £30m, to allow the company to take quick decisions on investments in an often fast moving environment.

It was clear from documentation provided that the council has been increasing commercial activity since 2013 and its approach has evolved over time. Current arrangements include the Economic Regeneration and Investment Board (ERIB) responsible for property acquisitions and the Trading and Enterprise Board (TEB) with responsibility for monitoring trading company activity for the council. This work is currently supervised by the Borrowing and Acquisitions strategy.

This evolution shows how ABC has adapted to changing circumstances. However, it is now important to review and make clear the governance structure for commercial activity that shows the inter-relationship of management team, cabinet, ERIB, TEB and trading companies. Although these inter-relationships are understood by senior members and officers this is not shared by the wider organisation and is not providing a transparent structure to avoid allegations of conflicts of interest. The council should expedite its intention to produce an updated Commercial Investment Strategy – to update the current Borrowing and Acquisitions strategy - and would be an opportunity to set out the operating governance structure, reporting/decision lines and membership composition.

It is currently not possible to show the investment profile of commercial activity with ROI and revenue generated. This work is being undertaken and needs to continue to show investment profile and for this to be reported as actual income generated against targets, taking account of commercial sensitivity.

The peer team were aware of instances of repeated service overspends with these mainly for demand-led services such as housing and homelessness. It would be helpful to continue to review such overspends to understand causes and identify ways of addressing them. The peer team were impressed by the innovative work to

purchase Christchurch House and convert this into eight units of short-stay living units for homeless people. The benefits from this are twofold. Firstly for homeless people accommodated and secondly for the council in saving on Bed and Breakfast accommodation. The property is estimated to save the council tax payer nearly £100k per annum and through that has paid for the initial costs of purchasing the building. The council has made provision in its capital programme to acquire a further property for short stay temporary accommodation.

3.5 Capacity to deliver and customer access

Throughout the peer challenge the team encountered a committed, competent and proud workforce. Staff were enthusiastic and happy about working for a 'can do' council and prepared to put the 'hard yards' in to enable delivery. Many staff told the team how they felt invigorated by being involved in getting things done and found this empowering.

The council has recognised the needs for succession planning with posts needing to be filled, whether due to imminent retirements or from the risks of losing staff to other neighbouring councils. There is a commitment to growing future managers with programmes developed for a Leadership Development programme and the Strength Development Inventory (SDI); and the council's planning service has a longstanding practise of 'growing its own planners' by recruiting and training graduates. There is also good support for learning and development with staff telling the peer team that they felt supported when any skills and training shortages were identified. The training budget of £90k has escaped cuts in recent years and is widely recognised as an important resource to ensure skills development matches the council's ambition.

ABC is an innovative and entrepreneurial council. Relationships with development partners are strong with the latter recognising the council's commitment to growth and making this happen. This outlook is important in attracting external investment to deliver, for example Local Growth funding from SELEP amounts to £50m+ towards the Big 8 projects, with this unlocking a further £115m. This in turn contributes towards NHB funding, increasing the Council Tax base and increased business rates.

Despite this the peer team suggest the council reviews whether resources are sufficient to deliver ambition. This is important as the political agenda is highly ambitious but with staff resources in some areas experiencing pressure. These pressure points include:

- sickness absence figures are rising. These are still not high compared to other councils but are an indicator of pressure.
- issues highlighted in the staff wellbeing survey
- staff vacancies – some service areas are experiencing difficulties in recruitment
- whether resources allocated between projects and mainstream services are in balance?
- do new areas of council activity have the skills needed, for example digital transformation?

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- a reduction in senior management capacity that runs the risk of a loss of focus and strategic input for outward facing services. This will be an issue to review post the May 2019 elections
- the council's culture change/transformation shift may not be fully embedded across the entire organisation.

It will be important for ABC to keep resources, priorities and pressures under continuous review so that adjustments can be made when pressure points emerge.

With its high levels of ambition the council has committed to the use of programme and project management tools to marshal resources and operate in a structured framework to enable delivery. However, despite this commitment programme management is not as effective as it could be. One of the shortcomings is that everything is felt to be made into a project and projects are more visible to members compared to the 'day job'. Another is that new projects are added with little obvious assessment of priority or of the resources needed to service these. This was described as diluting the focus of project management, working to agreed areas of importance, and of introducing "noise into the system".

On top of this the current project schedule appears to the peer team as being 'top heavy' with 57 pages of project activity consuming a great deal of organisational energy, on top of staff working to the 'day job'. Increasing clarity of what should and should not be a project, and prioritising this in line with available resources, would help to make programme and project management more effective.

Addressing these issues to improve programme management will require:

- strengthening the Project Initiation Document (PID) process so that all resources and other implications are fully considered at the outset
- consistently identifying outcomes/measures of success against projects at project brief/business case stage
- embedding the project management toolkit and the principles of programme management
- strengthening governance of programmes through the proposed Programme Board:
 - to ensure oversight of portfolio of projects in each programme
 - to monitor which are on/off track,
 - to identify and provide additional resource requirements when needed
 - to provide clear decisions on prioritisation.

The council is prepared to share services where obvious benefits arise, for example financial savings and/or increased service resilience. Examples include the Mid Kent Audit Partnership (with Swale, Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone Borough councils); the Mid Kent Joint Waste Partnership (with Swale and Maidstone Borough councils and KCC); ABC provides payroll services for Folkestone and Hythe District Council and Canterbury City Council administers Business Rates for ABC. The peer team believe that it is sensible to continue to take such a "pragmatic" view of sharing services. However, following on from the earlier point of increasing collaborative arrangements, the council could consider those of its services that it may choose to trade to others and those areas where learning from other councils could be beneficial to ABC.

The council is pursuing a digital transformation strategy. A strategy has been adopted and is being implemented. However, this is recognised as a modest digital transformation programme compared to what many other councils are working to. One reason for this is that transformation is not needed to achieve large financial savings, which is often an imperative for other councils. In contrast ABC recognises that valuable capacity can be released through digital transformation and this is the programme driver.

This programme involves the adoption of a digital transformation strategy and an agreed council investment of £200k for 2018-19. A Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system has been purchased and is about to go live and it is intended to redevelop the council's website by the end of 2018. Other developments include: digital champions nominated in each service team; the use of tag teams working with services and digital objectives included in staff appraisals and all service plans to embed digital transformation as part of the 'day job'.

This is a good foundation but that the council should consider the investment of dedicated resources to accelerate this process. Particularly in the case of the council's website where knowing current levels of customer demand - in person, by telephone and by email - could be projected to what these might be once website redevelopment work is complete. The shift in customer demand to online self-service, and the savings that could be expected from this, would provide the cost/benefits for ABC to speed up the process of customer 'channel shift' and to release capacity for other priority areas.

The peer team believe that there are a number of underlying principles needed to underpin digital transformation. These include:

- corporate recognition that digital transformation is important to progress, and is capable of generating additional capacity and savings, and that there is a council-wide commitment to this
- recognising the need to get a better understanding of customers and their behaviour to inform digital solutions
- being aware that a high degree of communication with customers is essential in advance of channel shift implementation
- strengthening the use of social media to support community engagement, communications/marketing, income generation and 'channel shift'
- considering how development of the council's ICT strategy can be accelerated and aligning this with the digital transformation strategy.

4. Next steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Kate Herbert, Principal Adviser is the main

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contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her contact details are: email kate.herbert@local.gov.uk and telephone 07867 632404.

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

Follow up visit

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the council assess the impact of the peer challenge and demonstrate the progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team. It is a lighter-touch version of the original visit and does not necessarily involve all members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the council. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next 2 years.

Next Corporate Peer Challenge

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Review every 4 to 5 years. It is therefore anticipated that the council will commission their next peer challenge before April 2023.

LGA Peer Challenge Action Plan

Recommendation 1: Develop and articulate the place vision for Ashford Borough to incorporate ‘the heartbeat’ and ‘civic pride’ elements that will guide further development, enhance quality of life and consolidate and capitalise on existing a future investment.

No.	Action	Deadline	Lead officers	Lead members
1	Hold a Cabinet away day to take forward ideas to inform a new corporate plan for 2020 onward with a ‘One Borough’ focus	30 November 2018	Lorna Ford	Cllr Clarkson
2	Hold a Town Centre Place Making Board conference and report on findings to Cabinet	31 December 2018	Richard Alderton; Lorna Ford	Cllr Bennett; Cllr Bradford; Cllr Galpin
3	Define specifications for an Ashford Digital Town app and report to Programme Management Group/Management Team	30 November 2018	Andrew Osborne; Ben Lockwood	Cllr Knowles; Cllr Pickering
4	Establish the scope and content of the emerging cultural strategy and programme	31 December 2018	Lorna Ford; Tracey Kerly; Christina Fuller	Cllr Bennett

Recommendation 2: Strengthen collaborative arrangement with East Kent and wider-Kent councils to galvanise consensus for infrastructure and inward investment to build on the record of growth and to continue this with the benefits shared more widely.

No.	Action	Deadline	Lead officers	Lead members
5	Work with partners in the Ashford Strategic Delivery Board to support work towards securing a place based deal for Kent		Tracey Kerly; Ben Lockwood	Cllr Clarkson
6	Develop a spatial strategy for East Kent with neighbouring councils	31 December 2018	Tracey Kerly; Ben Lockwood; Tim Naylor	Cllr Clarkson
7	Launch the East Kent development company using NNDR pooling to minimise risk and exposure	30 November 2018	Tracey Kerly; Ben Lockwood	Cllr Clarkson

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Recommendation 3: Review and re-define the respective roles and responsibilities of members and officers and set out how senior members and managers should model expected behaviours. Build in mechanisms for actions when such behaviours fall short.

No.	Action	Deadline	Lead officers	Lead members
8	Adopt new guidance governing councillor/officer relationships, expected behaviours and dispute resolution processes.	31 December 2018	Michelle Pecci; Terry Mortimer; Vivien Williams	Cllr Clarkson; Cllr Pickering
9	Embed the new guidance in councillor and officer inductions	1 May 2019	Michelle Pecci; Terry Mortimer	Cllr Pickering; Member Training Panel
10	Refresher training for staff and councillors on councillor/officer relationship guidance and dispute resolution process	1 April 2019	Michelle Pecci; Terry Mortimer	Cllr Pickering; Member Training Panel
11	Amend the constitution as appropriate to reflect the new guidance	1 March 2019	Terry Mortimer; Vivien Williams	Selection and Constitutional Review Committee

Recommendation 4: Review and refresh council support for member induction, ahead of the elections scheduled for May 2019, to specify the member role and requirements/responsibilities that accompany this.

No.	Action	Deadline	Lead officers	Lead members
12	Update the content of the framework documents for councillors and make the documents available online	1 May 2019	All Heads of Service	Member Training Panel
13	Signpost to LGA guides for new councillors as part of induction and framework documents	13 May 2019	All Heads of Service	Member Training Panel
14	Review the training package and induction process for new councillors to ensure that it is fit for purpose	1 May 2019	Terry Mortimer; Vivien Williams	Member Training Panel
15	Make full use of Modern.Gov including recording of delegated and officer decisions, committee attendance, vote records etc.	31 December 2018	Terry Mortimer; Vivien Williams	Member Training Panel
16	Implement mentoring system for new councillors to mirror the	1 May 2019	Terry Mortimer;	Member

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	mentoring system for staff		Vivien Williams	Training Panel
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Recommendation 5: Continue to work with Homes England to support housing growth and on the development of the council’s property company, A Better Choice for Property Ltd.

No.	Action	Deadline	Lead officers	Lead members
17	Build a closer working relationship with Homes England	31 December 2018	Sharon Williams	Cllr White
18	Identify suitable opportunities for joint working with Homes England to deliver additional affordable housing	31 December 2018	Sharon Williams	Cllr White

Recommendation 6: Produce an affordable housing strategy with partners to support a joint approach to developing options for the provision of affordable housing.

No.	Action	Deadline	Lead officers	Lead members
19	Produce a joint affordable housing strategy that encompasses partner organisation and ABC actions for delivery of additional affordable housing stock	31 December 2018	Sharon Williams	Cllr White
20	Lobby government with partners and other Kent councils for increased freedom and flexibility around HRA debt caps		Sharon Williams; Tracey Kerly	Cllr White; Cllr Shorter

Recommendation 7: Clarify the governance structure for commercial activity that shows the inter-relationship of Management Team, the Cabinet, ERIB, TEB and council trading companies so that these arrangements provide transparency and avoid allegations of conflicts of interest.

No.	Action	Deadline	Lead officers	Lead members
21	Restate the objectives of A Better Choice for Property Ltd in the context of the council’s wider approach to housing provision and financial stability of the council	31 December 2018	Tracey Kerly; Maria Stevens	Cllr Clarkson; Cllr Bell; Cllr Shorter
22	Revise the terms of reference and decision making route for TEB, ERIB and Cabinet (the Town Centre Place Making Board (TCPMB))	31 October 2018	Ben Lockwood; Terry Mortimer	Cllr Clarkson; Cllr Bell

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	having been agreed in July) to avoid duplication of responsibilities and powers			
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Recommendation 8: Review priorities, performance and allocation of resources in light of the recent residents' survey and consider developing a systematic approach to gathering, analysing and using customer feedback.

No.	Action	Deadline	Lead officers	Lead members
24	Communicate the results of the survey on a 'you said, we did/will do' basis in November edition of Ashford For You	30 September 2018	Lorna Ford	Cllr Clarkson
25	Conduct a review of the council's approach to consultation, develop and implement a consultation 'how to' guide	31 December 2018	Lorna Ford; Jennifer Shaw; Jessica Brown	
26	Develop a systematic way of gathering and applying customer insight to improve processes and inform future plans (including digital transformation)	31 March 2019	Lorna Ford; Michelle Pecci; Ben Robinson	Cllr Pickering; Cllr Knowles

Recommendation 9: Review and act on how new ideas/urgent priorities/proposals take away resources and impact on existing priorities and workloads.

No.	Action	Deadline	Lead officers	Lead members
27	Utilise the Programme Management Group to ensure PIDs are robust and can be resourced properly before MT consideration	16 August 2018	Lorna Ford; Charlotte Hammersley; Ben Lockwood	Cllr Shorter
28	Ensure that all ERIB papers are considered and signed off by Management Team or Directors before agenda publication	1 September 2018	Paul McKenner	Cllr Clarkson

Recommendation 10: Consider accelerating the digital transformation programme and investing in dedicated resource to drive this with the objective to release organisational capacity.

No.	Action	Deadline	Lead officers	Lead members
29	Review the scope and content of the digital transformation programme	30 November 2018	Michelle Pecci; Ben Robinson;	Cllr Pickering; Cllr Knowles

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			Ben Lockwood	
30	Allocate £150,000 for an enhanced resource to support acceleration of the digital transformation programme	30 November 2018	Ben Lockwood; Michelle Pecci	Cllr Shorter; Cllr Knowles
31	Embed digital transformation programme into general programme management through Programme Management Group monitoring	16 August 2018	Lorna Ford; Charlotte Hammersley; Ben Lockwood	Cllr Shorter; Cllr Knowles