

ASHFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT
2018-2019



MESSAGE FROM THE LEADER

As we approach the end of the council's current corporate plan, it is appropriate to reflect on both the achievements of the borough and its future. Our latest annual report shows that the council continues to operate well and deliver high quality, well-resourced services for residents and businesses in the borough; whilst also delivering key strategic priorities such as the Local Plan to 2030 and the first phases of development at Chilmington.

The year ahead promises to be an exciting one for the borough, with new developments such as The Coachworks and the Designer Outlet Extension adding to the town's offer and helping to build a renewed sense of civic pride in the borough. I look forward to sharing more of Ashford's continued progress with you all in future issues of *Ashford for You* and next year's annual report.



GERRY CLARKSON, CBE
Leader, Ashford Borough Council



MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

The maintenance of effective and good value for money services for residents whilst keeping council tax at the lowest level of any Kent district is a testament to the council's entrepreneurial approach. Through careful planning and working in conjunction with local and regional partners, the council has earned its reputation as an exemplary local authority, delivering transformative change for everyone in the borough and setting a standard for others to follow.

This year, we will be developing priorities for our next corporate plan, covering the period up to 2025, with input from our partners, parish councils, and most importantly our residents.



TRACEY KERLY
Chief Executive, Ashford Borough Council



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Cover photos (from top right)
River Stour, Ashford
High Street, Tenterden (credit: Ady Kerry)
Elwick Place, Ashford (credit: Ady Kerry)
Ashford Snowdogs, Civic Centre, Ashford

Rear cover photos (from top right)
Ashford International Station
Battle's Over: A Nation's Tribute, Ashford
High Street, Tenterden
Chilmington Green masterplan

FACTS AND FIGURES ABOUT ASHFORD BOROUGH



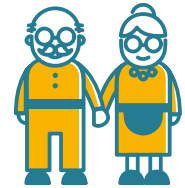
83% of residents are satisfied with their local area as a place to live



4,950 homes in the borough are owned by the council, with 72% of these built since 1945



54% of residents feel the council keeps them well informed



24% of residents will be aged 65 and over by 2030



3.9 million passengers used Ashford International in 2017/18



Ashford is the least densely populated borough in Kent (2.2 people per hectare)



Life expectancy at birth is higher than the national average for both men and women



47% of residents agree that the council provides value for money



93% of planning applications were approved in 2018/19



29.1% of the borough's residents are qualified to NVQ4 level



Ashford is the top recycling authority in Kent and 27th nationally



58.5% of adults are physically active, above the national average



Small businesses account for 80% of employers in the borough



Average weekly resident earnings for full time workers were £574.90 in 2018



12.9% of residents are employed in the knowledge economy



127,500 people live in the borough (2017 mid-year estimate)

THE CORPORATE PLAN 2015 - 2020

The council's Corporate Plan sets out our priorities for the future, and our aspirations for a borough where people want to live and businesses want to locate. The five priorities of the Corporate Plan are detailed below.

ENTERPRISING ASHFORD

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

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

LIVING ASHFORD

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

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

Memorial Gardens, Ashford



THE CORPORATE PLAN 2015 - 2020

ACTIVE AND CREATIVE ASHFORD

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

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

ATTRACTIVE ASHFORD

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

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

OUR UNDERPINNING PRINCIPLES

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

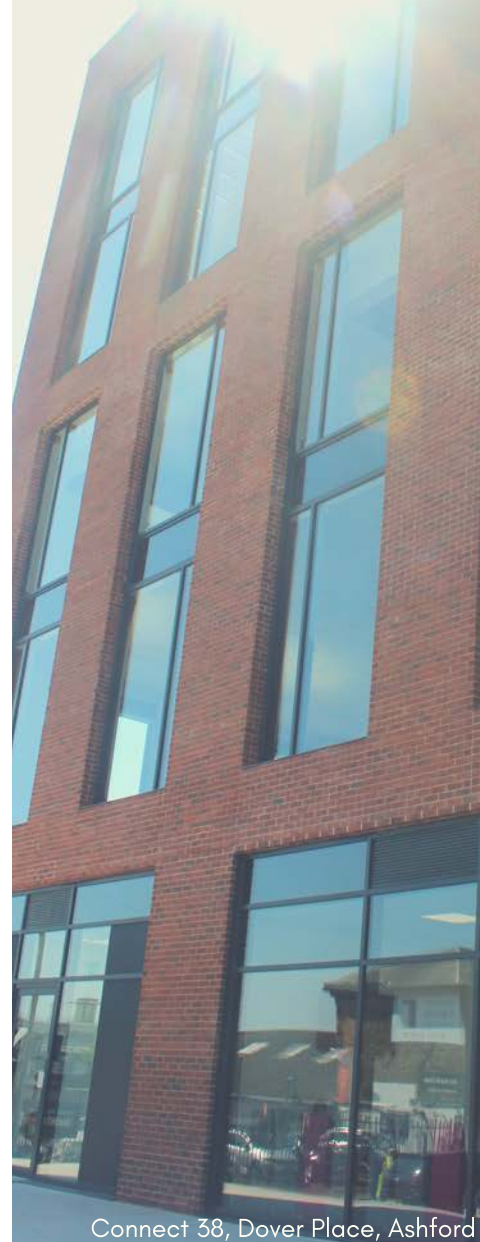
- A viable and sustainable replacement for formula grant, generating an additional £2m per annum by 2020
- Maintain a strong and effective governance framework
- A fair deal for all our residents and businesses through the use of council powers to ensure quality and compliance
- Proactive, useful, relevant and accessible communications and marketing

ENTERPRISING ASHFORD

2018/19 has seen a number of key developments for the town centre come to fruition with the delivery of the first phase of the Commercial Quarter in Connect 38, the largest office block to be built in Kent for 20 years, along with other commercial developments such as Elwick Place, the Curious Brewery and the Ashford Designer Outlet Extension adding to the changing skyline of the town, while exciting new ventures such as The Coachworks and the redevelopment of the former Mecca Bingo Hall will bring new life to the town through increasing the social and cultural offer of Ashford while delivering a boost to the nighttime economy.

The council's efforts have resulted in year on year increases in footfall in the town centre in defiance of trends seen across the country, whilst national and international press coverage showcasing the town and the council's approach has continued to drive interest and inward investment.

Connectivity remains key to delivering the effective economic growth of the borough, and the delivery of junction 10a of the M20 (currently under construction) along with the continuation of Eurostar services at Ashford International will ensure that Ashford remains the ideal location for business.



Connect 38, Dover Place, Ashford

Vacancy rates in Park Mall have remained at a low level throughout 2018/19, with 29 of 32 units occupied throughout the year - an occupancy rate of 91%. The council offers ongoing support to traders in Park Mall and has seen footfall in the shopping centre grow steadily each year since it was acquired by the council.

Independent traders such as Made in Ashford, The Little Teapot, Emporia Fabric and Craft, Snap Jewellery and The Record Store ensure a diverse offer within the centre alongside national chains; whilst council-led initiatives such as the 'Splashes of Summer' and Snowdogs Art Trail have provided new experiences in the town to further boost footfall.



Made in Ashford, Park Mall, Ashford

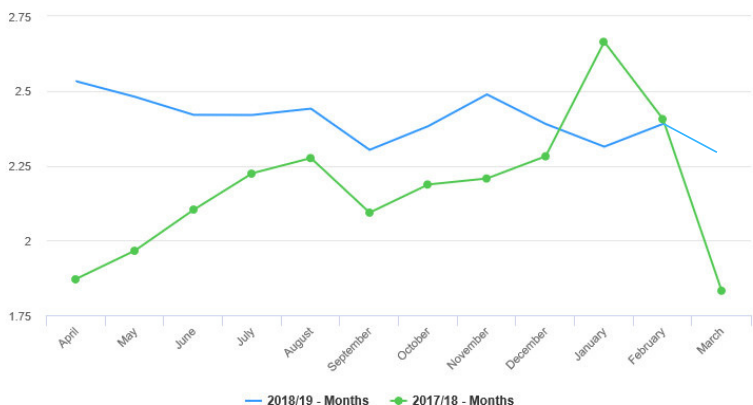




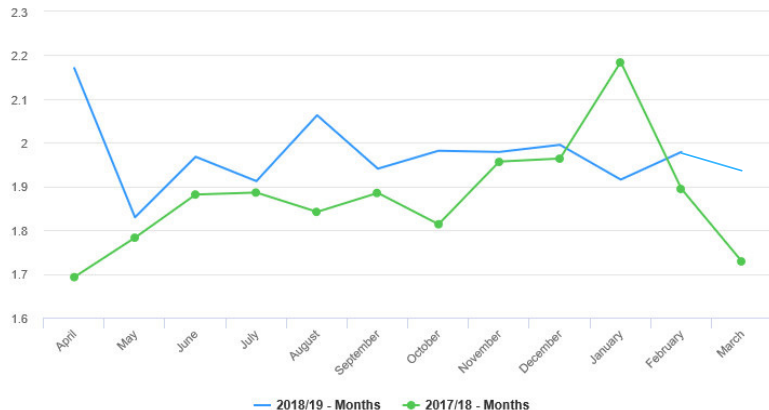
Income for car parks in Ashford town centre increased by 14% in 2018/19 from the previous year, with an above trend increase in October and November coinciding with the 'Snowdogs Discover Ashford' art trail. Whilst income for Tenterden car parks does not follow as predictable a month to month trend as Ashford, 2018/19 has showed a 2% increase in total annual income from 2017/18. Parking provision in Ashford also increased with the opening of the Elwick Place car park in December 2018 delivering 282 additional parking spaces.

The average spend per user across all council owned car parks in Ashford and Tenterden has increased ahead of parking charge increases, showing that people are spending more time in both towns and so demonstrating increased confidence in the borough's town centres. Average spend in Ashford for 2018/19 rose from £2.18 to £2.40, whilst average spend in Tenterden rose from £1.88 to £1.97 over the same period. Strong increases in average spend for both centres in January align with the post-Christmas sales.

Average user spend per session in GBP, Ashford car parks 2017-2019



Average user spend per session in GBP, Tenterden car parks 2017-2019



The council collected 99.13% of owed National Non-Domestic Rates (business rates) in the 2018/19 financial year against a target collection rate of 99%. The council has maintained its discretionary rate relief scheme and provides proactive support to businesses experiencing hardship to assist them in continuing to trade.

Through its service level agreement with the Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce, the council provided support to 102 pre-start and start-up businesses in the Borough in 2018/19. The council also works with established traders to facilitate the expansion of their businesses, such as with Made in Ashford, which has taken on additional space in Park Mall to open a plastic free market.

The council has also brought forward a number of town centre events in the last year to provide new experiences for visitors. The 'Splashes of Summer' campaign in July and August 2018 increased footfall and trade for town centre businesses through a series of family-friendly events and activities provided by LoveAshford.com and designed to animate the town centre.

In March 2019, the Cabinet endorsed the Ashford Town Centre Framework, created in response to the findings of the 2018 town centre consultation and the challenges facing the high street. The Framework sets out a vision and objectives to ensure the success and vibrancy of the town centre for future generations, as well as an ambitious and exciting programme of projects and activities to be implemented over the next five years.

LIVING ASHFORD

The adoption of the Local Plan to 2030 by the council in February 2019 sets an approach for the borough which aims to make sure that future development is well planned, helping to create great spaces and strong communities and providing a consistent approach to planning across the whole borough.

Ashford Borough Council's reputation for excellence in the housing sector continued to earn national recognition in 2018/19, with the authority nominated for UK Housing and Housing Heroes awards, as well as receiving special recognition for its commitment to welcoming and resettling Syrian refugees.

The council's New Build Affordable Homes Programme 2018–2022 seeks to continue the modernisation of existing sheltered housing schemes and bring forward the delivery of new affordable housing within the borough, whilst continuing the council's existing programme of street purchases and buying back ex-council house properties where appropriate. Through a series of strategic acquisitions of market rent properties, the council's property company has sought to provide a preferable private rented sector offer.



Finberry, Ashford



46 new build affordable houses were delivered by Ashford Borough Council in 2018/19, including the delivery of 34 units of affordable rented older persons accommodation at the multi-million pound modernisation of the Danemore sheltered housing scheme in Tenterden. Modelled on the multi-award-winning, dementia friendly Farrow Court scheme developed by the council in South Ashford, the new accommodation units are built to a high quality and are care ready. The council purchased 10 on-street properties in 2018/19 to bolster the resilience of its housing stock and continued to work with registered providers of social housing, who delivered 99 affordable rented and shared ownership properties in 2018/19.

The loss of rental income on void social rented and affordable properties has been kept low through 2018/19 due to the council minimising void turnaround times. As a percentage of the total rent roll, rent loss on social rented properties fell from 0.36% in quarter 1 to 0.24% in quarter 4, whilst rent loss on affordable properties fell from 1.42% to 1.06% over the same period.



Chilmington Discovery Park (Artist Impression)

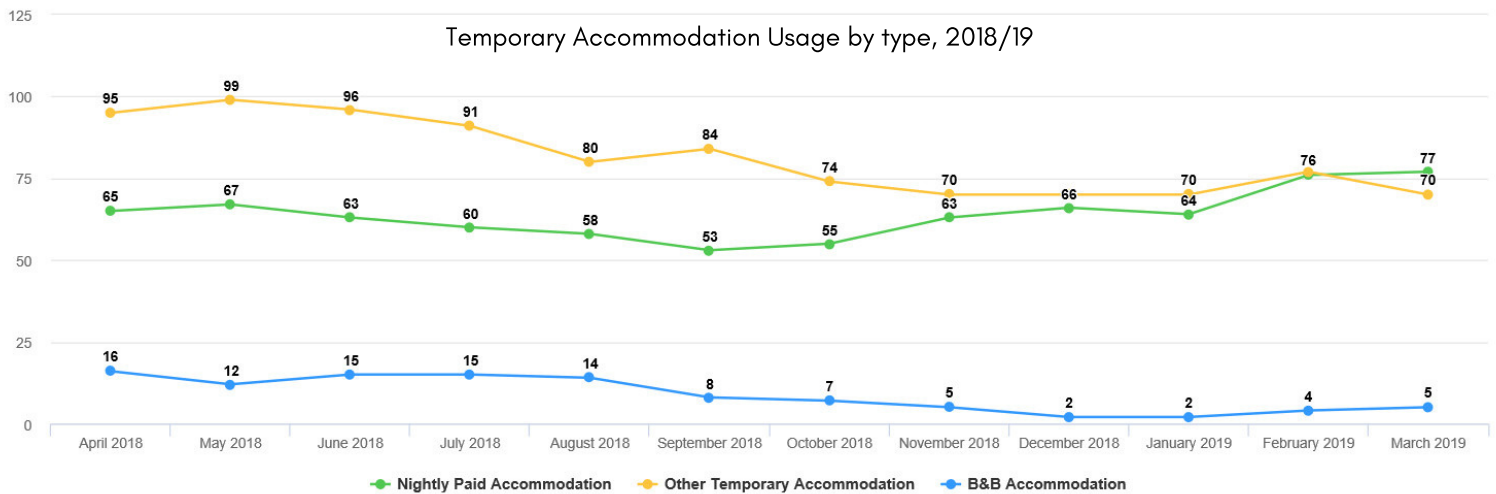


The council administered over £1m of disabled facilities grant adaptations in 2018/19, across more than 80 properties – representing the busiest year for the council in respect of disabled facilities grant cases. The council also spent more than £480,000 on disabled adaptations for council tenancies, with works ranging from fitting handrails to shower and wet room installations.

The introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April 2018 expanded the duties of the council in regard to addressing homelessness. In 2018/19, the council prevented 349 households from becoming homeless through actions such as negotiating continuations of tenancies and rent reviews to enable households to remain in their existing accommodation. The council also provided homelessness relief for 250 households through securing alternative accommodation.



Through securing alternative short term accommodation, both provided directly by the council and through other registered housing providers, the council has sought to limit the use of bed and breakfast accommodation to extreme emergency cases only. As a result, the number of households placed in bed and breakfast has reduced steadily through 2018/19, from 15 households at the end of quarter 1 to five households at the end of year.



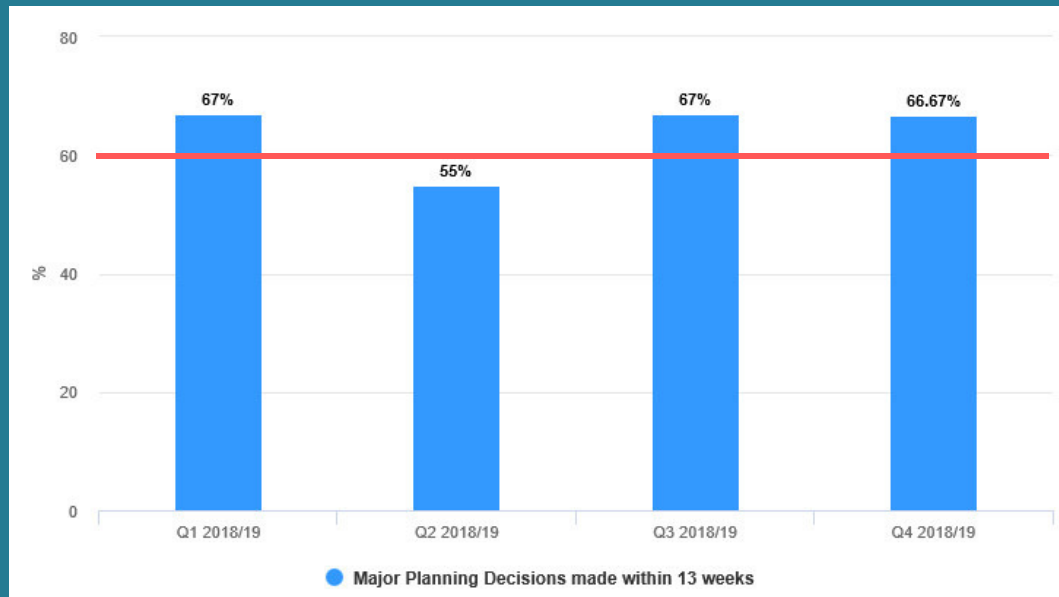
Right to buy application processing times remained well within statutory targets throughout 2018/19, with average turnaround times for confirming the eligibility for right to buy of 9.43 days for tenants living in an ABC property for more than three years (against a 28 day target) and 9.83 days for tenants living in an ABC property for less than three years (against a 56 day target).

The council received and investigated 251 complaints regarding the condition of private rented sector accommodation in 2018/19, of which 119 were resolved informally. Such complaints can vary in their complexity and the scale of any corrective works required by the landlord, and so resolution can be a lengthy process.

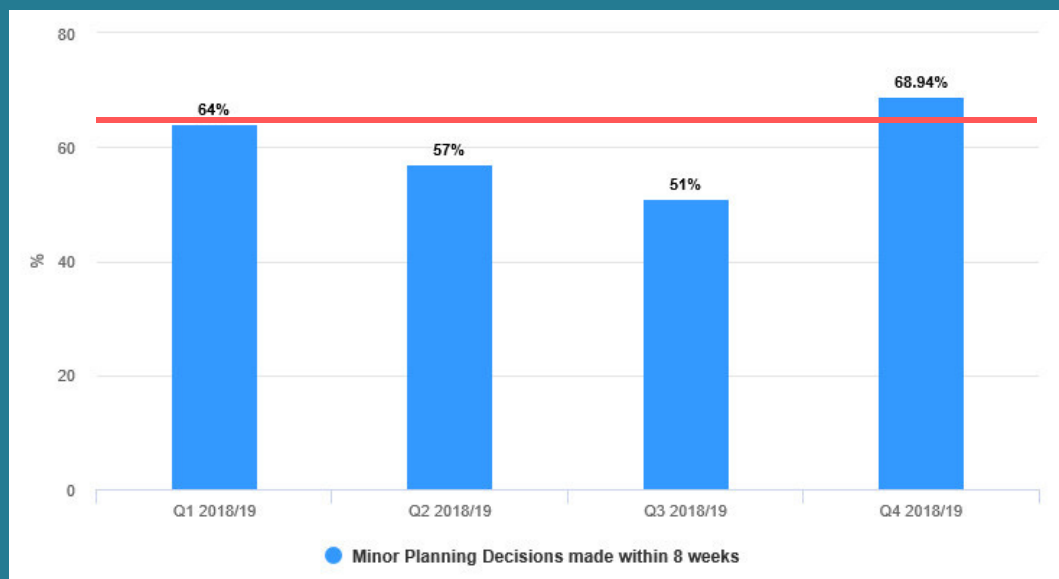




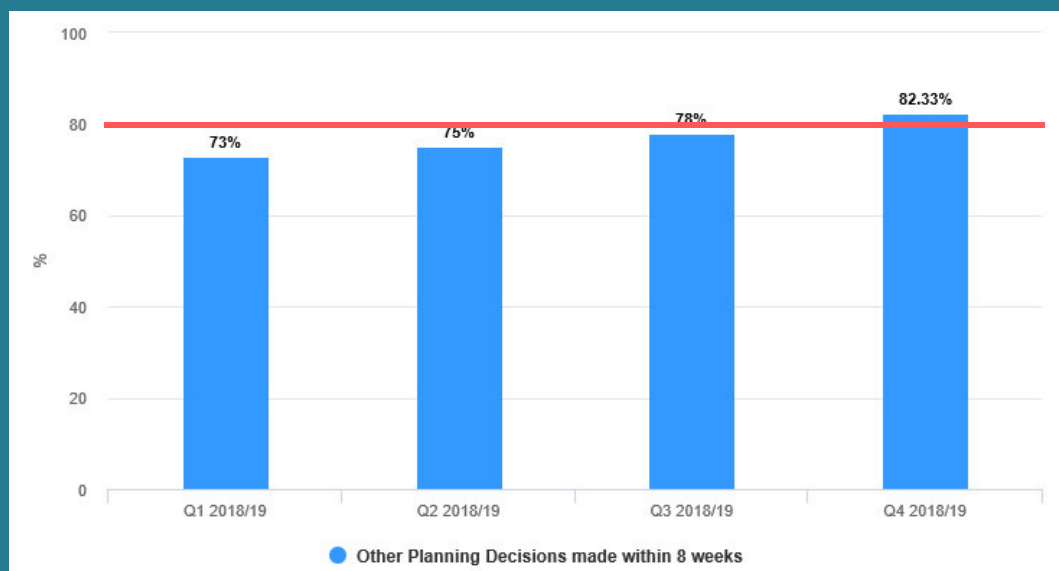
Planning application approvals remained above 90% throughout 2018/19. Despite unexpected pressure in-service arising from a high vacancy rate, the council has continued to process and approve large volumes of planning applications. Pragmatic and consistent planning enforcement remains a priority for the service, with 36.5% of planning contraventions occurring in 2018/19 resolved informally.



The percentage of major planning applications determined within 13 weeks remained above the 60% government target in three of four quarters. Due to the small number of complex cases involved, performance against this target can be volatile. A drop below target occurred in quarter 2 due to staff shortages, however performance returned above target for quarters 3 and 4.



Minor planning application processing times have been down against the central government target of 65% through much of 2018/19 due to staff vacancies within the planning and development service. Through concerted recruitment efforts and the careful use of consultants, performance has returned above target in quarter 4.



'Other' planning applications represent a significant proportion of the caseload for the Planning and Development Service. Staff shortages through 2018/19 have caused a decline in performance against the target of 80%, however this decline has been reversed through the year, with performance above target for quarter 4.



The council's environmental health team carries out hygiene and food safety inspections on all food premises in the borough throughout the year, as well as running food hygiene training courses open to all catering businesses. The percentage of businesses in the borough with a food hygiene rating of at least three stars out of five has been above 98% for the entirety of 2018/19.

Ashford Lifeline is a 24 hour service providing an instant response at the touch of a button, giving a personal security system to enable residents who live alone to so do independently and safely. The council sets high standards for call answer speeds through the system, and 99.8% of calls were answered within 60 seconds in 2018/19. The annual customer survey of lifeline users in 2018/19 showed that 91.8% of customers are satisfied with the service.



Ashford Borough Council has a state of the art CCTV monitoring centre which provides remote CCTV monitoring to both public spaces and private businesses and plays a major role in detecting and deterring crime and antisocial behaviour. To ensure the efficacy of this service, 2018 saw the council begin a programme of upgrading its CCTV cameras.



Ashford Monitoring Centre, Ashford



The council collected 98.11% of owed council tax in 2018/19. Whilst Ashford Borough Council collects council tax from residents of the borough, only around 10 pence of every pound of council tax collected funds Ashford Borough Council services, with the remainder funding Kent County Council, Kent Police, Kent Fire and Rescue Service and (in parished areas) Parish or Town Councils.

The Revenues and Benefits team process both new benefit claims and changes of circumstance for existing claims for residents. In 2018/19, new benefit claims were processed in an average of 24.56 days against a target of 28 days; whilst changes of circumstance have been processed in an average of 2.77 days against a target of 10 days.



Finberry, Ashford





ACTIVE AND CREATIVE ASHFORD

The council's continued commitment to safeguarding and improving the health and wellbeing of the borough's residents and providing high quality cultural and leisure experiences saw a range of initiatives and projects delivered in 2018/19.

In October, the Ashford One You Shop was a runner-up in the prestigious 'Health on the High Street' award at the Royal Society of Public Health awards, recognising the work of the One You Shop in supporting communities to tackle their health and wellbeing concerns. With the aid of funding provided by the council, the One You Shop will complete a relocation into larger premises within Park Mall in early summer 2019.

Providing a quality leisure offer to enable residents to lead healthy, active lives remained paramount in the council's priorities in 2018/19, with the council approving consultation on a new walking and cycling strategy, opening the Repton Connect Community Centre and facilities and providing a range of new open spaces and play areas across the borough.

The Snowdogs Discover Ashford art trail showcased 35 giant Snowdog sculptures designed by local and regional artists, alongside 19 Snowpups created by local schools around the town. The trail drew huge public interest over its 10 week duration and a closing auction of the sculptures raised over £140,000 for Pilgrim's Hospice.

2018/19 also saw one of the council's Big 8 projects, delivery of a purpose-built home for the Jasmin Vardimon Dance Company, given two major boosts with the council approving development of a site on Ashford's Henwood Industrial Estate and Arts Council England approving a grant of over £3m towards the ground-breaking project.



Create Festival 2018, Victoria Park



Ashford's free annual musical extravaganza, Create Festival, drew 12,000 people to a sun-drenched Victoria Park in 2018 to see more than 30 talented entertainers perform across four stages, complimented by local street food traders, theatre and children's entertainments.

The council continues to support the voluntary sector and individual projects that help deliver services and improve facilities for the community. Between April and December 2018, the council administered over £166,000 worth of grants to rural and urban initiatives serving borough communities at a ratio of 1.04:1 between urban and rural awards.





The council maintains a large number of play areas throughout the borough and audits these on an annual basis to determine their play value and condition. The latest audit showed that of 54 council owned play areas, 57% were 'satisfactory' or 'excellent', with 18 of an 'excellent' standard and 13 of a 'satisfactory' standard. This represents a 10% increase on the previous year, where 14 play areas were 'excellent' and 11 were 'satisfactory'. The council also opened two new play areas in 2018/19 – Bridgefield Park in Park Farm East and Bulleid Place in Newtown.

Kestrel Park Play Area, Ashford



The council owns a number of leisure facilities across the borough which are managed in partnership with local trusts and councils, providing a wide range of activities to enable residents to live healthy, active lives. In 2018, there were 11,408 total memberships across the four main leisure sites (Stour Centre, Julie Rose Stadium, Tenterden Leisure Centre, Kingsnorth Recreation Centre).



In 2018, the council and Ashford Leisure Trust began the process of procuring a new leisure operator for the main leisure facilities in the Ashford area to enable significant investment in leisure provision to meet the needs of the borough's growing population.

Ashford is home to the UK's first One You shop which provides free health services, support and advice to the public. Now into its third year of operation, the One You shop has delivered 4,626 health interventions, and in January 2019 saw its highest footfall to date, with 292 people accessing services.

ONE YOU



The Ashford Visitor Information Centre relocated to a spacious and user-friendly site (incorporating an exhibition space) on the ground floor of the Ashford Gateway Plus in 2018. Since relocating, the percentage of tourism related contacts made in-person has increased by an average of 18% per month against the previous year's performance, with a significant increase coinciding with the Snowdogs Discover Ashford art trail.

Repton Connect Community Centre, Ashford



ATTRACTIVE ASHFORD

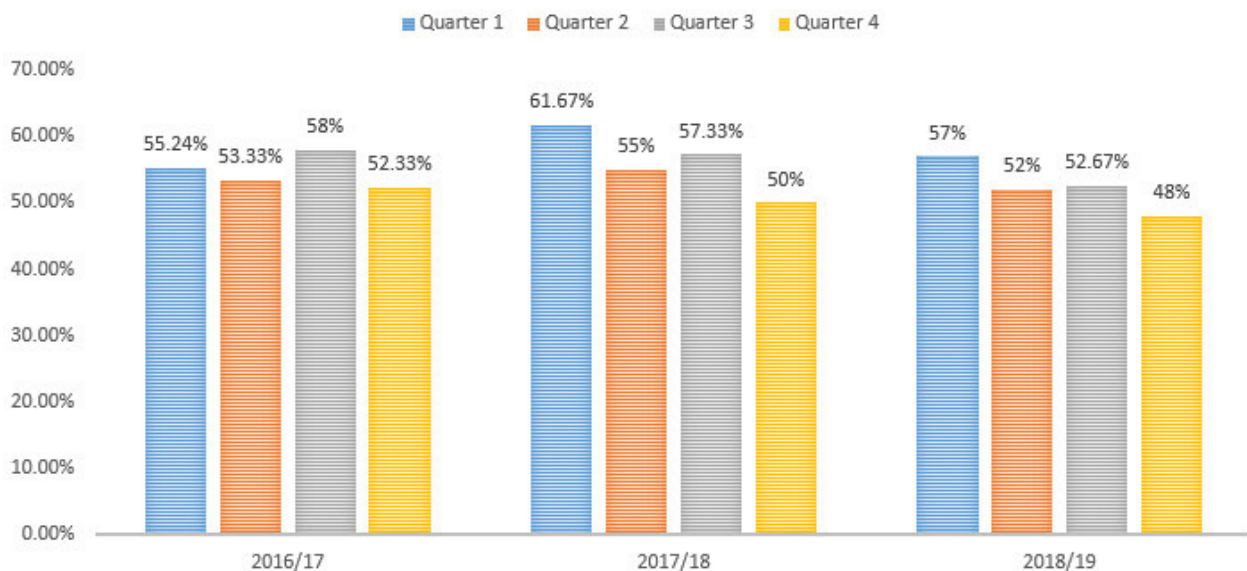
2018/19 saw the council's in-house grounds maintenance service, Aspire Landscape Management, complete two successful years of operation. Since its inception, the service has grown significantly and remarkably achieved three ISO standards simultaneously in 2018. The council also secured £167,000 of funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to develop a bid to restore and improve Victoria Park.

A number of commemorative events took place in 2018 to mark the centenary of the armistice. The renowned Fields of Battle, Lands of Peace photographic exhibition went on display in Ashford's Memorial Gardens as part of its national tour in June 2018; a commemorative paving stone was laid in Charing to honour the only Victoria Cross recipient to be born in the borough and Ashford took part in the national commemorative event, Battle's Over: A Nation's Tribute with a service of remembrance set against a poppy tribute in Ashford's North Park. Thanks to support from residents, the poppy tribute raised nearly £5,000 for the Ashford branch of SSAFA.

2019 saw the start of a year-long programme of events, campaigns and initiatives in support of the Year of the Environment as part of the council's aim to connect, protect and enhance the environment. The council also committed to reducing plastic waste at 2018/2 Create Festival and adopted a new Air Quality Strategy in March 2019.



The council maintained its position as the top recycling authority in Kent and moved to 27th in the UK recycling league table (up from 35th) for its performance in 2017/18. Recycling rates for the past three years are shown below and whilst the borough's rates have dipped below the 50% target in quarter 4 of 2018/19, this follows the trend of previous years. Throughout 2018/19, the council has utilised targeted education campaigns to assist residents in maximising the amount of waste recycled.





The success rate for refuse collections has remained high throughout 2018/19, with 99.96% of refuse collections per 100,000 collections made being successful across the year. Focused education and awareness campaigns led by the council's Environment and Land Management service have helped residents to increase the amount of waste recycled and minimise contamination of recyclates.

The 2018 residents survey included a range of questions related to recycling and the attitudes of the borough's population towards it, the results of which have been used to inform the council's approach to education around waste and recycling. The results recorded that 69% of residents recycled everything that they could, compared to only 3% saying they did not recycle. For food waste recycling, 77% of residents responded that they participated in this on a weekly or daily basis, with 18% noting that they did not take part in food recycling.



Residents were also asked what they normally do if they have more recycling than will fit in their green bin. 40% of respondents said that they would take it to the household waste recycling centre and 29% would place it next to their green bin in a clear sack for collection. Only 13% of respondents said they would place the additional recycling in their refuse bin.

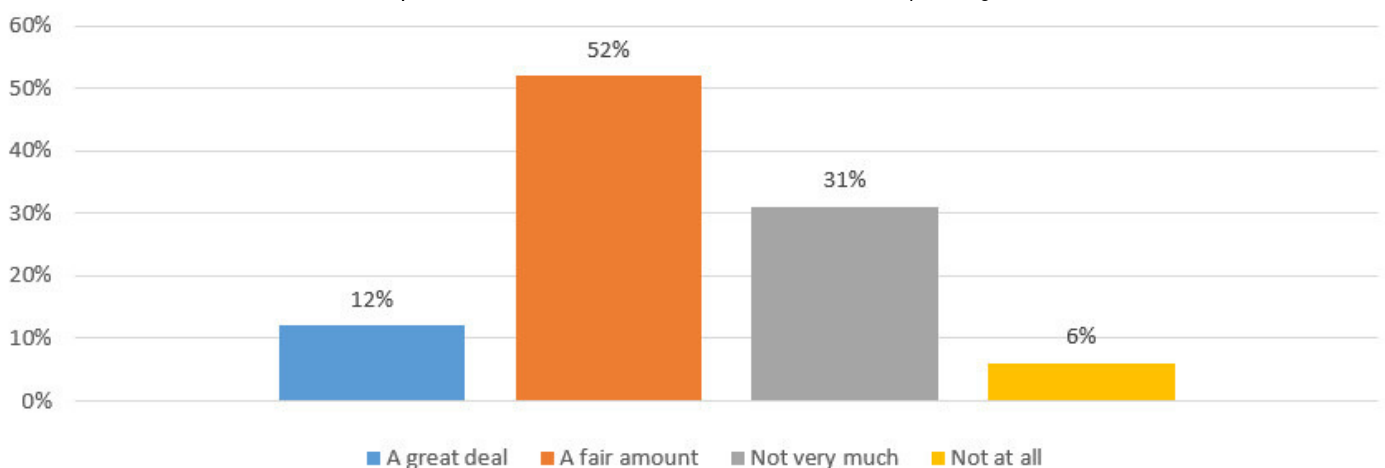


Battle's Over: A Nation's Tribute
North Park, Ashford

The survey also asked residents how satisfied they were with a range of council services, which showed that the highest satisfaction rates were with the council's refuse collection service (77% satisfied) and the borough's parks (71% satisfied) and play areas (62% satisfied). Residents were also asked to what extent they felt the council was committed to improving the local area, with 64% of respondents believing that the council is very or fairly committed to local area improvements.



Residents Survey 2018 - "How committed is the council to improving the local area?"



OUR UNDERPINNING PRINCIPLES

As part of the council's aim of providing proactive, useful, relevant and accessible communications, April 2018 saw the publication of the first issue of *Ashford for You*, a quarterly magazine distributed to all households in the borough covering events, services, people and places. The magazine has been well received by residents and bolsters the council's communications output.

In striving for improvements to the governance of the council, 2018 also saw Ashford welcome the Local Government Association (LGA) to conduct a 'peer review' of the council's performance and service delivery. The LGA praised the council's approach, ambition and impact, noting the strong, passionate and purposeful leadership and the clear expression of corporate priorities.

Recognition of those who contribute to the borough's success also featured highly in the council's work this year, with the return of the Civic Awards and the launch of the Ashford Ambassador Award recognising individuals who make a significant contribution to the development, wellbeing, strength and civic dignity of the Borough. The inaugural award was presented to Dr Lilian Turoiu of the Romanian Cultural Institute as part of a ceremony unveiling a statue of Queen Marie of Romania in Elwick Place.



Alex Chinneck Artwork
Kent Woolgrowers Site, Ashford



With the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation in 2018, additional pressures were placed on the council in regard to data protection and security. Improvements in data retention, privacy and the integrity of data sharing agreements have helped to minimise data breaches, with only 2 major personal data breaches occurring in 2018/19. Both of these breaches were reported to the Information Commissioner's Office, who deemed that no further action was required in regard to either.

Transparency in the council's governance remains paramount. The council responded to 1,005 freedom of information requests in 2018/19, of which 98.1% were completed within the statutory 20 working day time limit.

Designer Outlet Underpass improvement works
Ashford





At the start of the 2018/19 financial year the council surveyed 10,000 households to gather their views on the borough and the services provided by the council. The results of this survey have informed the council's work in 2018/19 and will continue to do so as the council moves into its next corporate plan period.

HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH THE WAY THE COUNCIL RUNS ITS SERVICES?



73%

Very or fairly
satisfied

Very or fairly
dissatisfied

14%



TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU THINK THE COUNCIL UNDERSTANDS THE NEEDS OF ITS CUSTOMERS?



64%

A great deal or a
fair amount

Not very much or
not at all

36%



TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE YOU CAN INFLUENCE THE DECISIONS THE COUNCIL MAKES?



18%

Strongly or tend
to agree

Strongly or tend
to disagree

58%



HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH YOUR LOCAL AREA AS A PLACE TO LIVE?



83%

Very or fairly
satisfied

Very or fairly
dissatisfied

10%



The council welcomes the government's requirement for large organisations to be more transparent on gender pay and will nurture our culture of supporting women in the workplace and ensuring that success is defined by talent, not gender or circumstance. The council's gender pay gap – the difference in average pay between the men and women in the workforce, expressed relative to men's earnings – was 15.8% in 2018/19, down from 16.2% in 2017/18.



The council's digital transformation programme enables residents to engage with the council digitally for many services, such as reporting environmental issues using the council's 'Report It' app, however a large number of enquiries are handled by our dedicated customer service team. Despite being a high demand service, the average call wait time for 2018/19 was in line with target at 1 minute and 38 seconds.

The council has committed to handling complaints effectively, fairly and in a timely manner. With a clear focus on getting service delivery right first time, the council seeks to minimise complaints and seek to resolve any received as early as possible. Of 233 complaints received in 2018/19, 83% were resolved at stage one of the formal complaints procedure, increased from 81% in 2017/18.





Ashford Borough Council

www.ashford.gov.uk



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