

ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2023/24



2023/24 Annual Governance Statement

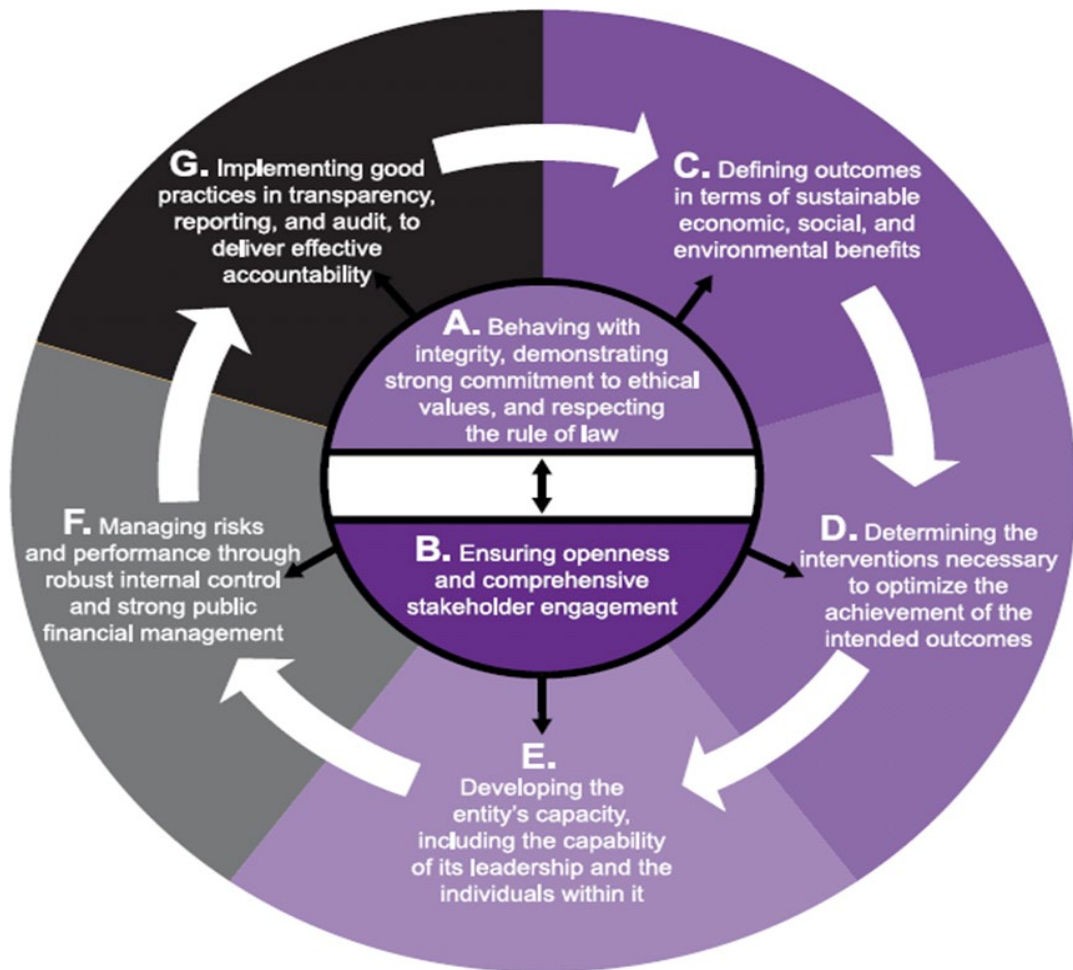
Scope of responsibility

1. Ashford Borough Council is responsible for ensuring its decisions and business are conducted according to the law and proper standards. Public money must be properly accounted for and all resources applied efficiently and effectively in order to secure best value for its residents and taxpayers.
2. The production of an Annual Governance Statement (AGS) is a requirement of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015, regulation 6(1). Good governance is fundamental to meeting the council's responsibilities and achieving high levels of service for residents. The Statement explains the effectiveness of the governance arrangements for the year ending 31 March 2024 and sets out any action for planned improvements in the following year 2024/25. This statement provides assurance to the council and its stakeholders that good governance arrangements are in place.

The Local Code of Corporate Governance

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

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



4. The main principle underpinning this Code is that the council's governance processes and structures focus on delivering sustainable economic, societal, and environmental outcomes.
5. The council meets the principles in the Code through a framework of policies, procedures, behaviours and values. This framework provide Members and officers with effective tools and consistent governance arrangements across the organisation.
6. The diagram explains good governance is dynamic, and that the council should be committed to continuous improvement.
7. This AGS sets out:
 - Part 1:** how the council is dealing with improvement areas identified in last year's AGS.
 - Part 2:** how the council complies with the principles of good governance set out within the Local Code.
 - Part 3:** any planned changes to the council's governance arrangements for implementation during 2024/25.

Part 1: Dealing with last year's key improvement areas

8. The 2023/24 AGS identified eight key improvement areas. Progress on remedying these governance exceptions was reported to the Audit Committee during the year and is set out below.

Presentation of Changes to the Constitution

9. Following a review of the constitution provisions in relation to executive arrangements, a wider health check of the constitution is in progress to identify further opportunities for presenting the constitution in a more concise modern format. The revised executive arrangements have been completed and uploaded. Further changes have been made to modernise/shorten including improved search ability, revised CPRs and Financial Procedure Rules and moving some non-essential information into links which will also help with future reviews of such material.”

Budget Consultation

10. Over the course of 2023/24, work has been conducted to explore alternative digital consultation platforms. This formed part of a wider review of how the council can improve the way residents are consulted on various proposals and policies, for example, regarding the draft budget. A procurement exercise has been undertaken to identify the types of software that can help deliver our overall consultation aims and priorities.

Project Management Toolkit

11. The Project Management Toolkit has been updated to reflect the changes that were made to the council's governance arrangements, for example, to the council's Section 106 Process and process for scoping digital projects.

Corporate Policy Tracker

12. A Corporate Policy Tracker has been introduced to Services to ensure that all council policies are reviewed in a timely manner and are kept updated with any key changes, for example, in line with amendments to legislation. The tracker has also been developed to keep policies stored in a central place which the Council's Management Team can oversee regularly and remind Services of upcoming review dates.

Monitoring of Savings Programme Delivery

13. Delivery of the savings programme has continued throughout the 2023/24 year, in line with the council's budget monitoring process. Reports have been prepared on a quarterly basis to update Cabinet on the savings progress and

the council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee additionally have overseen this.

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

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

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

Source of Assurance	Developments in 2023/24
Behaving with Integrity	
Members' Code of Conduct	<p>The Monitoring Officer's Annual Report for 2023 showed there had been a significant increase in complaints principally at parish level. It has been proposed that further engagement with Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) regarding training opportunities and other initiatives such as sitting in on some council meetings and offering mediation in appropriate cases was agreed.</p> <p>A further meeting between Kent Monitoring Officers and KALC is currently being arranged and this will also focus on further steps they can take to assist such as sitting in on meetings at local councils where difficulties persist so that advice and assistance can be offered subsequently.</p>
Annual staff performance appraisals	
Declarations of interest made at meetings	
Standards Committee including independent person	
Register of interests & hospitality	

Whistleblowing policy	There has been 1 investigation under the Whistleblowing policy in the last year.
Complaints policy	The Housing Ombudsman and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman have proposed a new joint Ombudsman code seeking to put learning from customers at the heart of council operations and also a more consistent approach. A project team is overseeing the introduction of the Code to ensure the council is compliant. Changes include complaint response times, performance reporting and designated complaints personal.
Open and accessible public meetings	The council has implemented new IT equipment to improve the quality of meetings for those attending in person and engaging or viewing online. The system is up and running and whilst there have been some technical problems encountered during the roll out, the quality of the meeting production is much improved and further enhancements are currently being made to help ensure smooth operations for future meetings.
Social media guidance	

Demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values	
Constitution	
Staff recruitment, retention policies	
Staff competency framework	
Corporate Training Programme	A focus on launching an Internal Development Management Programme comprising of 69 courses (32 face to face, 3 blended and 34 online offerings). Internal Digital Skills Audit
Procurement policy, including social value	

Equalities objectives	A review of the Equalities objectives has begun and adoption will take place in conjunction with the Corporate Plan.
Corporate Values – Ambitious, Creative, Trustworthy	
Kent and Medway Information Sharing Partnership and Agreement	
SmartHub dedicated wellbeing area	

Respecting the rule of law	
Constitution	Review of the Constitution is ongoing.
Support provided for all committees	
Monitoring Officer	
Committee Terms of Reference	
Cabinet report template	
Anti-Fraud and Corruption policy	
Bribery Act 2010 Policy Statement	
Anti-Money Laundering Policy	
Breach Management Policy	
Contract Standing Orders (CSO's)	The CSOs have been reviewed as part of the review of the Constitution. These have recently been published on the council's website.
Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Statement	
Enforcement Framework	
Elections Act	A new electoral act at the May 2023 elections was implemented that introduced photographic voter identification for polls; Limited postal vote handling; Removed the time limits on overseas voter registration; Increased accessibility requirements in polling stations;

	EU Citizens voting and candidacy rights; A change to the frequency of absent voting refreshes.
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Other Sources of Assurance

Behaving with integrity

15. All agendas for council meetings seek declarations of interest and the type of interest. Ad hoc advice on interests is regularly sought from the Monitoring Officer and his staff by borough Councillors and parish clerks/councillors. This demonstrates a good level of understanding and a culture of compliance with the code of conduct in relation to interests. The Monitoring Officer's annual report each year deals with the activity under the council's ethical framework.
16. The Monitoring Officer's annual report to the Standards Committee assesses activity in probity and related governance matters and includes complaints to the Ombudsman. The Standards Committee monitors any issues of probity raised in Ombudsman investigations. The most recent report to the Committee in January 2024 covered the Ombudsman report on complaints for the period 1st April 2022 to 31 March 2023). There is some concern for the increase in the number of Code of Conduct complaints received, however, further engagement with Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) regarding training opportunities and other initiatives such as sitting in on some council meetings and offering mediation in appropriate cases was agreed. Full details can be found in the [Monitoring Officer's report](#) to the Standards Committee.
17. A new joint code between the Housing Ombudsman and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman has recently been introduced to local authorities for handling complaints effectively and fairly. A Project Team has been established and an action plan produced that summarises key changes and actions that will ensure we meet the requirements of the Code. The aim of the Joint Code is to raise standards of complaint handling across housing and local government services and is coming into force in April 2024, and the Council must be fully compliant by April 2025.
18. An action plan has been compiled to implement the changes resulting from the new Joint Code. The purpose of the Code is to enable organisations to resolve complaints raised by individuals quickly, and to use the data and learning from complaints to drive service improvements. It will also help to create a positive complaint handling culture amongst staff and individuals. Some of the key changes include introducing shorter timescales for Stage 1 complaints to encourage early resolution; publishing complaints performance data, development of a new complaints tracker and training roll out to managers through

the council's Corporate Management Team meetings. It is also required that a dedicated Project Team will oversee delivery of the action plan and monitor complaints performance monthly for the first six months to assess compliance.

Key Improvement Area 1: To adopt the new Ombudsman Joint Code on Complaint Handling, implement the action plan to deliver the changes and monitor progress and compliance of the Code through a dedicated Project Team.

19. The Monitoring Officer's report also covers code of conduct complaints for which there has been a significant increase in the 2023 calendar year, mainly at parish council level. The report makes recommendations regarding future meetings between the council and KALC representatives and identified that steps were required to be taken to develop a training programme for Parish Councillors. The focus of the training would be to provide good governance skills including chairing meetings and conflict management, to seek to drive down incidence of formal complaints. Full details can be found in the [Monitoring Officer's Report](#).
20. Other work has been undertaken by the Kent Monitoring Officers to review the 'Arrangements for Handling Code of Conduct Complaints' in addition to the LGA code. A report with the findings and recommendations of this review is due to be brought forward to the Standards Committee during the 2024/25 year.
21. All new staff and Members receive induction and training upon arrival. For staff, the induction pack includes both a copy of the staff Code of Conduct, and the council's customer service values. The Member Training Panel has made arrangements for post-election code training and parish council representatives will be included. The Training Panel recognised the importance of this and also suggested that refresher training should be provided mid-term to help address councillor turnover at parish level. The induction programme being developed includes 'frameworks' which provide an overview of each council service. This will be complemented by a market stall event for new councillors to become familiar with council services.

Demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values

22. The council has adopted corporate values – Ambitious, Creative and Trustworthy (ACT) that are embedded into the council's governance framework. For example, they are incorporated into the recruitment and appraisals processes and are

fundamental to the 'Our Principles' section of the new Corporate Plan 2024 to 2028.

23. The annual appraisal process is also based on a 'competency framework'. The framework outlines a set of professional and key behaviours that staff display every day within their roles. The behaviours are linked to ACT as demonstrated in the table below:

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

24. The framework continues to evolve to support staff to be the best they can and evidence this in a fair and consistent manner. The competencies are used for recruitment and selection; performance management including appraisals and training and development.

25. The corporate training programme reflects the council's strong commitment to ethical values with topics in the 2023/24 programme including 'Dementia Friends', health and safety and safeguarding. There has been a focus this year on the council's internal management development, with courses offered to the workforce in both technical management and behavioural and skill based management. There has also been a drive to provide more apprenticeships and currently there are 11 apprentices across the Council.

26. The Council launched an internal Management Development Programme earlier this year. The courses are designed for all line managers and last year (to April 1st) prior to the official launch of the Management Development Catalogue 112 managers completed 18 courses of which 12 were eLearning, five were workshop based and 1 was a blended offering with both a face-to-face session and an online offering. Nine Managers also completed the Ashford Manager suite of courses. Overall, the Council ran face to face (online or in person) 87 courses since April 1st with 887 delegates attending so far.

27. Training provision both externally and internally has changed significantly over recent years. Where previously the expectations were to hold face to face events, often with travel and subsistence costs, most providers have moved online

with their offerings. This has increased availability of courses and reduced secondary costs (rail fare and subsistence). The costs for the actual training has however, remained static or increased as providers have had to invest in technology and platforms to deliver the courses. An online training request form has been in operation over the last year and has been working well to get both relevant information and commitment to the training available.

28. At Ashford Borough Council, it has been important for our digital team to understand how staff use IT systems and what digital skills staff possess, to help identify the strengths and areas for improvement of our workforce. A digital skills audit was undertaken in December 2023 to collect information in regards to how competent staff felt when using different digital skills, in order to ensure additional training was provided going forward to support staff in using the systems that we have.

Respecting the rule of the law

29. As a statutory body the council's structures for decision-making, its rules and its processes are influenced by legislation and associated regulation. A fundamental part of our governance, therefore, is the Constitution.

30. The Constitution is a legal requirement and sets out how the council runs, how it makes decisions and the guidance to be followed. Some of these processes are needed by law, while others are chosen by the council. The Constitution has several chapters, which set out the basic rules for governing the council's business. More detailed procedures and codes of practice are set out in accompanying rules and protocols.

31. Parts of the Constitution are periodically reviewed and changes made to ensure arrangements assist the council in achieving its ambitions and its responsibilities to its residents and taxpayers. A review of the Constitution was commissioned in June 2021 with a particular focus on presentation of the Executive arrangements. During 2023, the updated constitution was uploaded to the website. The revised executive arrangements have been completed and uploaded. Further changes have been made to modernise/shorten including improved search ability, revised CPRs and Financial Procedure Rules and moving some non-essential information into links which will also help with future reviews of such material. The 2023 Local Elections resulted in a significant change in the council's leadership. In particular, the council has relied on having a robust and functioning constitution to manage the change in political balance.

32. A variety of boards and groups covering different topics are constituted each year to deliver the business of the council to the benefit of residents and stakeholders.

33. These all have clear objectives which are set out in their terms of reference and reviewed annually to ensure they remain relevant to delivering the council's objectives. The new administration have been keen to implement cross party working when addressing the council's key challenges. Cross party working groups have been created with a scope to set out their remit. Topics under review by the Task Groups include the Medium-Term Financial Plan, Markets and Councillor Safety. Additionally, this year a new Officer group was formed to review how best to fill vacancies as and when they arise, with the idea of encourage more cross-departmental working.

Principle B – Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

Source of Assurance	Developments in 2023/24
Openness	
Annual Report	
Council tax information available online	
Corporate Plan	A new Corporate Plan for 2024 to 2028 has been developed and is due to be open for public consultation shortly before being presented to Cabinet for approval.
Regular Residents' Survey	Next Survey planned for 2025
Six monthly Resident's magazine	
Consultation Portal	The council are in the process of implementing a new consultation software following a procurement exercise.
Mod.Gov: Minutes, agendas, decisions published	
Hybrid Equipment to facilitate virtual and face to face meetings.	Hybrid meeting equipment in the Council Chamber has been installed.
Smart Hub	
Chief Executive monthly email newsletter	
Grants Policy	A new Funding the Voluntary and Community Sector policy was adopted in July 2023.

Engaging comprehensively with institutional stakeholders	
Command and Control Structure	
Ashford Strategic Delivery Board	
Ashford Health and Wellbeing Board	
Ashford Community Safety Partnership	
Armed Forces Pledge	
Land Mapping Commission	
UK Shared Prosperity Fund	The council set up the Community Amenities Grant Scheme which

	are aimed at supporting community amenities across the borough to make improvements to community infrastructure and are made up of two grant streams.
Rural England Prosperity Fund	The council successfully secured funding from Defra's Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) which aims to provide support to communities and businesses in rural areas of the Borough.

Engaging stakeholder effectively, including individual citizens and service users	
Communications Strategy	
Equalities Impact Assessment Template	
IT, Digital and Customer Service Strategy	Transformation projects have taken place during the year to improve service efficiency and the customer experience.
Citizens' Panel	The Panel was launched in July 2023 and has accrued approximately 250 Members so far who are willing and able to undertake regular consultations regarding the councils service delivery and priorities.
Engagement HQ Consultation Software	The Council have adopted a new consultation platform as part of a wider review of of how the council can improve the way residents are consulted on various proposals and policies.

Other Sources of Assurance

Openness

34. The Council adopted a new Funding the Voluntary and Community Sector Policy during 2023. The policy aims to ensure that funding is allocated to the voluntary and community sector in a coordinated and efficient manner and provides more stability for those organisations that are adding value or providing additional services to support the corporate objectives. This policy demonstrates the council's ongoing commitment to our communities through supporting the astounding work undertaken by the voluntary, community sector, and local councils across the Borough.
35. Council committee and other types of meetings are conducted both in person and in hybrid form in line with government legislation. The council has continued to use the most appropriate way of meeting recognising the benefits of both virtual and face-to-face meetings. In particular, there has been an increase in members of the public attending virtual or hybrid meetings as they reduce the need for travel. Specialist hybrid equipment has been installed in the council's Committee Rooms to

facilitate smaller hybrid meetings and this has been well received by Officers and Members. During 2023, hybrid equipment was installed in the Council Chamber, to facilitate larger meetings. This will enable residents, Councillors and Officers to watch and participate in meetings online, which has negated journeys to the Civic Centre and reduced travel across the Borough.

Key Improvement Area 3: Work be undertaken to maximise the benefits of the new hybrid meeting equipment and ensure it is used to its full capabilities.

Engaging comprehensively with institutional stakeholders

36. Ashford Borough Council has been successful in securing its allocation of the UK Government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF). The council's overall allocation is £1,016,512 for UKSPF and £593,508 for REPF. Both funds are linked to the UK Government's Levelling Up White Paper and aim to support interventions in the key themes of Communities & Place, Supporting Local Businesses and People & Skills, Supporting Rural Communities and Supporting Rural Businesses. The funding is allocated for work between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2025.
37. To secure the funding, Ashford Borough Council submitted activity and spending plans which Government has approved. For UKSPF, the plan outlined 7 areas of activity including town centre improvements, youth crime prevention, supporting the visitor economy and supporting the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector as well as employability and skills. For REPF, the plan outlined four key areas of activity including: Community Amenities Grants, Rural Green Business Grants, Electric Vehicle Charging Points and Rural Place and Provenance support. During the past year, a framework for delivering the grants schemes was created including adoption of policy by the council's Cabinet. The council's Community Grants Panel oversaw the allocation of the grants following officer assessments.

Engaging with individual citizens and service users

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

2023 PSPO Consultation - Singleton Lake
Voluntary and Community Sector Funding Policy Consultation
Sexual Entertainment Venues Policy Consultation
Pluckley Neighbourhood Plan Review (Regulation 16)
International House Public Consultation
Tenants' Communication Survey 2023
2023 Gating of Churchyard Passage PSPO
Ashford Mural Project and Events Consultation
Tenterden Neighbourhood Plan (Regulation 16)
Ashford Local Plan 2041 - Call for Sites

39. The council have considered ways that it could increase engagement with residents during a scrutiny review of Consultation and Engagement undertaken in 2022. It was recommended from this review that options around setting up a Citizens' Panel were explored. Following this work, it was recognised that although Citizens' panels were not a new concept, they were increasingly used across the public sector to maintain a regular dialogue with a sample of residents, consult them on a range of issues and keep them informed of outcomes. Therefore, it was agreed that a Panel would be set up with the aim to increase consultation on service delivery and priorities.
40. The Citizens' Panel was launched in July 2023 and currently has 240 residents signed up to receive regular consultations and polls regarding specific issues. For example, we are currently consulting on energy efficiency and retrofitting to assist our Climate Action team with their research into resident's experience with these concepts, to inform how the council could help more in this area in future. An annual consultation programme for the Panel was also developed to ensure regular engagement with Panel Members during the year and will be reviewed during the next municipal year.
41. During the latter part of 2023, a procurement of the council's consultation platform was undertaken as part of a review of the council's consultation and engagement practices. In particular, the council are due to consult on its next Local Plan in later 2024, so it was important to ensure the platform could support the consultation needs of all services.
42. As a result of the procurement, the council procured a new platform Engagement HQ and it is being used to consult on the draft Corporate Plan in the first instance. It is intended that Engagement HQ will help align the desires for greater public

engagement and build on recommendations that arose from the Overview and Scrutiny review of the council's corporate consultation methods.

43. A public consultation on the draft budget is held each year. The Budget Scrutiny Task Group scrutinises whether the draft budget is sound and achievable. One of the key improvement areas highlighted last year was to explore alternative ways of consulting residents on the draft budget proposals. Following the implementation of the new consultation software, it is intended that the platform will help to create more engaging content using the dedicated online consultation 'hub'.
44. As part of the council's digital programme, work is being undertaken to deliver transformation projects that improve services through the process of digitalisation. A new system has been adopted in the Safety and Wellbeing Service to deliver licensing and environmental health functions digitally and improve service efficiency. In addition, the digital team have prioritised the integration of a new IT system in the Environment, Property and Recreation Service to accompany the start of a contract with our new waste management provider. Both of these Services are customer facing and therefore aim to improve the customer experience as outlined in the IT, Digital and Customer Services strategy.

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

Source of Assurance	Developments in 2023/24
Defining Outcomes	
Corporate Plan	A new Corporate Plan is being developed to outline the council's key objectives up to 2028.
Performance and action monitoring	Performance measures are being reviewed as part of development of the new Corporate Plan 2024 to 28.
Risk Management Framework	
Risk Appetite Statement 2021	Reviewed in conjunction with the draft Corporate Plan

Sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits	
Medium Term Financial Plan – Capital Programme and Investment Strategy	
Records of key Cabinet decisions and supporting materials	
Equality Objectives ensure fair access	Equality Objectives are being reviewed as part of the new Corporate Plan.
Project Management Toolkit	The toolkit has been updated to reflect changes to digital processes and the Section 106 process.

Other Sources of Assurance

Defining Outcomes

45. The [Corporate Plan 2022-2024](#) is structured around three themes which along with the council's principles are all geared towards achieving the Ashford Ambition.

46. As the current Corporate Plan is nearing the end of its lifespan, the council has been developing a new Plan over the past year that will articulate its ambitions and actions to 2028. The council is in the process of carrying out extensive consultation to develop its new Plan before its planned adoption in Summer 2024. The Corporate Plan is publicly available on the council's website and is subject to regular scrutiny by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – primarily through quarterly performance reports. Performance measures will also be reviewed as part of the Corporate Plan development.

47. The council sets out its equalities objectives in line with the Equalities Act 2010 and Public Sector Equality Duty. The Equalities Objectives and actions were reviewed by the council's Health and Wellbeing Officer Group which will help to inform what they should be for the next four years. The reviewed objectives will be submitted for adoption to the Cabinet together with the Corporate Plan in Summer 2024.

Key Improvement Area 4: The council's performance measures should be reviewed to ensure they reflect the ambitions of the new Corporate Plan 2024 to 28.

Sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits

48. The council has a planned programme of projects, which recognises the need for flexibility. These projects are brought together in the Corporate Plan action plan, which sets out all the activities that will contribute towards delivering our objectives. The council's Programme Management Group oversees the programme.

49. A project management toolkit provides a framework for project managers to maximise the economic, social and environmental benefits of projects. The toolkit includes business case and project inception template, action logs, risks assessment guidance and project review documents for all project managers to use. During 2023/24, the toolkit was updated to reflect a number of key changes and learning from the Planning Digitalisation Project. The changes made to the toolkit were communicated to staff.

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

Source of Assurance	Developments in 2023/24
Determining interventions	
Cabinet reports include options appraisals	
Medium-Term Financial Plan	
Directors Meeting	
Director Service Sessions	
Programme Management Group	
Commercial and Digital Board	
Cabinet Forward Planning Sessions	A forward planning day was held for Cabinet Members to outline the key aspirations for the next Corporate Plan.
Council's transparency page	

Planning and programming Interventions	
Cabinet forward plan	
Risk management Framework	
Internal Audit	
Scrutiny Reviews and Work Programme	The Cabinet Key Schedule of Decisions is now a standard item on Overview and Scrutiny Committee agendas to advise Members on upcoming policies/reviews
Service planning aligns budgets, plans and objectives	
Communications Strategy	

Business Continuity Plans	
Emergency Plan	
Business Continuity Incident Management Team	
Weekly Policy Update	
Remote Working Policy	
Management Team Annual Programme	
Corporate Policy Tracker	A policy tracker was developed to store all council policies to ensure they are reviewed and updated regularly.

Optimising achievement of intended outcomes	
Procurement Strategy includes Social Value	
Budget Scrutiny Task Group	
Appraisals	
Corporate Training Programme	
Personal Development Training	
Public consultation on Draft Budget	

Other Sources of Assurance

Determining Interventions

50. The council's Directors meet on a weekly basis, to consider strategic issues and respond to performance and risks and changing circumstances as they emerge in an agile way. Director Service Sessions are also held on a quarterly basis for Directors to discuss individual service performance, current budget management, staff sickness and training as well as note any celebrations or successes.

Planning and programming interventions

51. During 2023, the Mid Kent Audit Partnership completed an audit of the council's IT Disaster Recovery to test whether the council has appropriate controls in place to manage the risks related to disaster recovery. The Audit Committee has received updates on the audit outcomes and good progress has been made in responding to the recommended actions

outlined by the Partnership. The Partnership also share information with the Audit Committee regarding their current position on reviews they are undertaking currently and those scheduled in future.

52. The Council has an extensive list of corporate policies that require reviewing every few years to ensure they are up to date. For example, some policies will need to be updated in line with changes to legislation. In the latter months of the 2023/24 year, the Council developed a corporate policy tracker to ensure that all policies are stored in a central place which the Council's Management Team can oversee regularly and remind Services of upcoming review dates. An exercise was undertaken with all Managers across the Council to get Services to update their suite of policies. Now up to date, the Tracker is set up to alert Officers when their policies are due an upcoming review, using our performance management software to do so, and is reported on to the Council's Management Team on a six-monthly basis.

Key Improvement Area 5: Services to identify policies due for review using the Corporate Policy Tracker and provide timescales for the implementation.

53. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee develop a new work programme annually to plan when scrutiny reviews and reports are expected to Members. To help the Committee improve how they programme future work, as of May 2023 it was agreed that the Cabinet Schedule of Key Decisions was included as a standard item on their meeting agendas. This enables the Committee to have oversight of reports expected at Cabinet in the following few months, particularly items relating policy development and review.

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

Source of Assurance	Developments in 2023/24
Developing the entity’s capacity	
Roadmap meetings	
Senior Leadership Team	
Organisational Restructures	A review of the council’s senior management team was conducted in 2023.
Directors Meetings	
Director Service Sessions	
Management Team	
Programme Management Group	
Developing the capability of the entity’s leadership and other individuals	
Chief Executive Council Briefings	
Chief Executive staff updates ‘Tracey Talks’	
Staff Survey	

Other Sources of Assurance

Developing the entity’s Capacity

54. The council regularly reviews its resourcing needs and structures it has in place so that defined outcomes are achieved effectively and efficiently. During 2023, a review of the senior management structure was undertaken by the Chief Executive in order to meet the required savings agreed in the mid-term financial plan and to continue to deliver the Council’s Corporate Plan. Following consultation with staff and the council’s Joint Consultative Committee, the proposed changes recognised the need to reduce overhead costs but ensured the structure continued to be responsive and integrated in its approach. Cabinet

approved the proposals in October 2023 with immediate effect.

55. Relocation of the Council's Civic Centre was proposed in response to a reported budget gap whereby a savings plan was required to be drawn up. During later 2023, the Council approved the decision to relocate the Civic Centre to International House. Some of the key proposed benefits of the relocation are financial savings, repurposing the current Civic Centre to meet other local needs and reduction in the council's carbon emissions. The relocation will help make a sizeable contribution to the savings requirements but a wider savings strategy is also continuously being reviewed. Extensive consultation has taken place with staff and the public to ensure that their views helped shape the proposals.

Developing the capability of the entity's leadership and other individuals

56. Members had the opportunity to attend regular training sessions and briefings on relevant topics and are detailed in the Member Induction Programme. From May 2023, a programme commenced for new Council following the elections. This programme included training sessions around topics such as Code of Conduct, Scrutiny Essentials and Planning. A Market Stall Event was also held for new Councillors to better understand the different functions provided by the Council, highlight the work undertaken day to day and allowed Members to meet Officers face to face. Members were also invited to attend training on an individual basis and examples this year including personal safety for Councillors and

57. All staff were asked to complete a Staff Survey during the year to inform future policy development, future development programmes, and themes and priorities of our wellbeing and engagement programmes. The key focuses of the survey were around hybrid working arrangements in the first part, questions about staff working life/working day in the second, and thirdly regarding staff welfare. The findings of the survey were shared with the Council's Corporate Management Team to provide headline feedback on the responses. A good response rate of 56% was received and was representative of all council services. As a result of the survey feedback, it is proposed that an action plan will be rolled out during the year to address some of the main points raised by staff including;

- a. Updates to working from home guidance and office etiquette
- b. A push on internal comms tools for staff outside the civic centre
- c. A review of how we approach equipment at work/home
- d. A review of staff engagement activities to encourage face to face interactions (Onion Club too!)

- e. Regular temp check surveys and polls to gauge staff views

Key Improvement Area 5: To roll out an action plan following the results of the 2023 Staff Survey to address key points raised by staff regarding work/home office arrangements and staff engagement methods.

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

Sources of Assurance	Developments in 2023/24
Managing Risk	
Risk management framework	
Risks regularly considered by Audit Committee and Management Team	
Risk Management Software (Pentana)	
Risk Appetite Statement 2021	The council's risk appetite statement has been reviewed as part of the new Corporate Plan development.
Service Planning	
Managing Performance	
Quarterly performance reporting, including to Overview and Scrutiny	The council's suite of KPIs will be reviewed as part of the new Corporate Plan and the council's governance arrangements Overview and Scrutiny monitor the council's savings programme quarterly.
Publication of all public committee minutes and agendas	

Robust internal control	
Internal and External Audit plans and reports	
Effective, resourced Internal Audit function	

Managing data	
Designated Data Protection Officer	
Data Protection Policy	
Six monthly reporting on data protection issues and freedom of information requests	
	Migration to OneDrive took place over the course of 2023/24 to sync all folders in the cloud, allowing greater ability for users to share and manage permissions with their files.
Data Protection Impact Assessment	
Remote working and portable devices guidance	
Quarterly budget monitoring reports to Cabinet	

Strong public financial management	
Statutory Guidance for Publication of accounts	

[Other Sources of Assurance](#)

[Managing Risk and robust internal controls](#)

58. As part of the adoption of the Council's new Corporate Plan 2024 to 2028, an overarching review of the council's risk register and risk appetite will take place during the next municipal year. The register and risk appetite will be reviewed to ensure that the strategic risks to the delivery of the Corporate Plan are fully captured and managed accordingly. The strategic risk register and risk appetite are reviewed quarterly by the council's Management Team but will also be refreshed in 2024 in line with preparing the next Corporate Plan.

59. The Regulator for Social Housing is introducing new consumer standards in April 2024. To prepare for this the Council worked with an independent specialist Housing Quality Network (HQN) to review how ready the Council is to meet these regulations. The audit results highlighted a number of key areas that need to be improved including data quality and storage in relation to Decent Homes standards and compliance. It found that the Council's housing property management framework, which should provide assurance that compliance and building safety are being delivered and managed, is not as effective as it should be. This impacts on the recording mechanisms and this has resulted in not having a clear audit trail of routine or follow-up maintenance being carried out.
60. Responding to this the Council has communicated the issues raised and the plan for improvement to Members through a Chief Executive briefing, written to all tenants and set up a webpage for the latest information, which includes some questions and answers. The Council also published a media release on its website for tenants and other interested parties. The Chief Executive wrote to the regulator to fully update them on the current position and reassure them that Ashford Borough Council has a plan in place to respond and fully comply with the regulations within one year.
61. The steps include a detailed action plan, clearly laying out the actions required, responsible individuals, the expected outcome and how this will be evidenced. Each action has a risk rating. Both the action plan and risk scores are to be considered at a weekly meeting where officers are monitoring the plan. It has been proposed that the Audit Committee will receive regular reporting on the progress of resolving these issues in addition to the establishment of an Asset Compliance and Improvement Board, however, for completeness it is also proposed as a key improvement area for this year.

Key Improvement Area 6: A Board, chaired by the Leader, is established and the Audit committee to monitor the Housing compliance action plan quarterly.

62. The draft budget proposals for the 2024/25 year included a savings programme in order to close the year's budget gap and to reduce the draw on reserves, it is imperative that the council deliver the recommended savings programme over the next few years and close the financial deficit within the council's Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP). It was recommended in last year's statement that the Council ensured the savings programme was monitored closely. Quarterly reports were received by the Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee during the year and this will continue in the 2024/25 year as savings are still being delivered.

Managing Performance

63. The performance of individual projects is monitored on Pentana and reviewed at monthly meetings of the Programme Management Group. Any lessons learned during project delivery are captured through the use of the Project Evaluation Document and shared corporately through the Group. The council's key performance indicators will be reviewed as part of the adoption of the council's new Corporate Plan.

The Auditors Value for Money report of the council's arrangements recommended an annual Procurement report to update on activity during the year and updates on regulation and training with a report to the relevant committee. The purpose of the recommendation was to provide oversight of the function in-year to Members. Along with other recommendations in the report, the council will look to implement over the course of the year ahead.

Managing Data

64. The importance of data protection continues to be communicated across the organisation with regular information by way of a blog on the council's Intranet and Smart Hub.

65. Additionally, six monthly updates are provided to the council's Management Team to summarise any data protection issues and the number of Freedom of Information that have arisen during the six month period.

Strong public financial management

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

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

Sources of Assurance	Developments in 2023/24
Implementing good practice in transparency	
Accessible website	
Transparency page	
Publications Scheme	
Implementing good practice in reporting	
Annual Report	
Annual financial statements	
Annual Governance Statement	
Corporate committee template	
Internal Audit function	
Assurance and effective accountability	
Head of Internal Audit	
Six-monthly update on governance exemptions to Audit Committee	

Other Sources of Assurance

Implementing good practice in transparency

67. The council has a continued commitment to transparency and meeting relevant legislative requirements. Data published under the Governments Transparency Code is available on the transparency pages of the website. These data sets include council spending, salaries, fraud outcomes and the gender pay gap.
68. The Transparency pages also explain the Publication Scheme which details the different classes of information that are routinely made available; Freedom of Information, Environmental Information and Subject Access Requests. Also available, is a comprehensive list of the council's policies and strategies which govern the way in which members and staff operate.
69. Another recommendation of the Auditor Value for Money report was that a report be put to the Audit Committee and subsequently Council, setting out a proposal to recruit an independent member to the Audit Committee.

Key Improvement Area 7: to respond to the Audit Value for Money Report by bringing forward a report to the Audit Committee on the recruitment of an independent member to the Audit Committee.

Implementing good practice in reporting

70. Reports to the council's committees are consistently presented through the use of a corporate committee template. The template ensures that due consideration is given to relevant factors to inform decision makers including equalities impact, financial implications, risks, carbon neutrality and consultation.
71. The Internal Audit function for the Council is delivered through the Mid Kent Audit Partnership, a 4-way shared service with Maidstone, Swale and Tunbridge Wells councils. The Audit Partnership provides internal audit, consultancy, and advisory support to the council, and delivers a programme of work (an audit plan) each year.

How effective is Ashford Borough Council's governance in meeting these principles?

72. The Head of Audit Opinion statement for 2023/24 is set out below:

“Following two years of reduced capacity of the internal audit team due to significant staff changes and shortages, a partially successful recruitment has led to a period of greater stability within the team. Overall progress on the planned programme of work delivered by internal audit has improved with a greater number of audits completed in 2023/24. In addition to the results of the internal audit work concluded during the year, additional sources of assurance have also been included to support my opinion. A summary of where it has been possible to place reliance on the work of other assurance providers is presented in the annual internal audit report. Utilising all these forms of assurance I can draw a positive conclusion as to the adequacy and effectiveness of Ashford Borough Council's risk management, control and governance processes. In my opinion, Ashford Borough Council has adequate and effective management, control and governance processes in place to manage the achievement of their objectives.”

Part 3: Planned changes to governance areas in 2024/25

73. Continuous improvement is fundamental to good governance and therefore the actions set out in the table below are proposed for the year ahead.

74. These are set out in bold within the report, with a short action plan summary below:

No.	Governance Area	Responsible	Date Due
1.	To adopt the new Ombudsman Joint Code on Complaint Handling, implement the action plan to deliver the changes and monitor progress and compliance of the Code through a dedicated Project Team.	Head of Policy and Performance	September 2024
2.	Work be undertaken to maximise the benefits of the new hybrid meeting equipment and ensure it is used to its full capabilities.	Head of Policy and Performance Member Services Manager	June 2024
3.	The council's performance measures should be reviewed to ensure they reflect the ambitions of the new Corporate Plan 2024 to 28.	Head of Policy and Performance	September 2024
4.	Services to identify policies due for review using the Corporate Policy Tracker and provide timescales for the implementation.	Head of Policy and Performance	December 2024
5.	To roll out an action plan following the results of the 2023 Staff Survey to address key points raised by staff regarding work/home office arrangements and staff engagement methods.	Assistant Director for HR, Customer Services, Communications and Digitalisation HR Manager	September 2024
6.	A Board, chaired by the Leader, is established and the Audit committee to monitor the Housing compliance action plan quarterly.	Assistant Director for Housing	December 2024

7.	to respond to the Audit Value for Money Report by bringing forward a report to the Audit Committee on the recruitment of an independent member to the Audit Committee.	Deputy Chief Executive	December 2024
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75. Through further action during 2024/25 in the areas noted on the previous page, the council's overall governance arrangements will remain strong – and indeed will strengthen further.

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



Cllr. Noel Ovenden
Leader of the Council



Tracey Kerly
Chief Executive