

Inspection report

May 2005



Achieving Sustainable Growth - Ashford's Future

Ashford Borough Council

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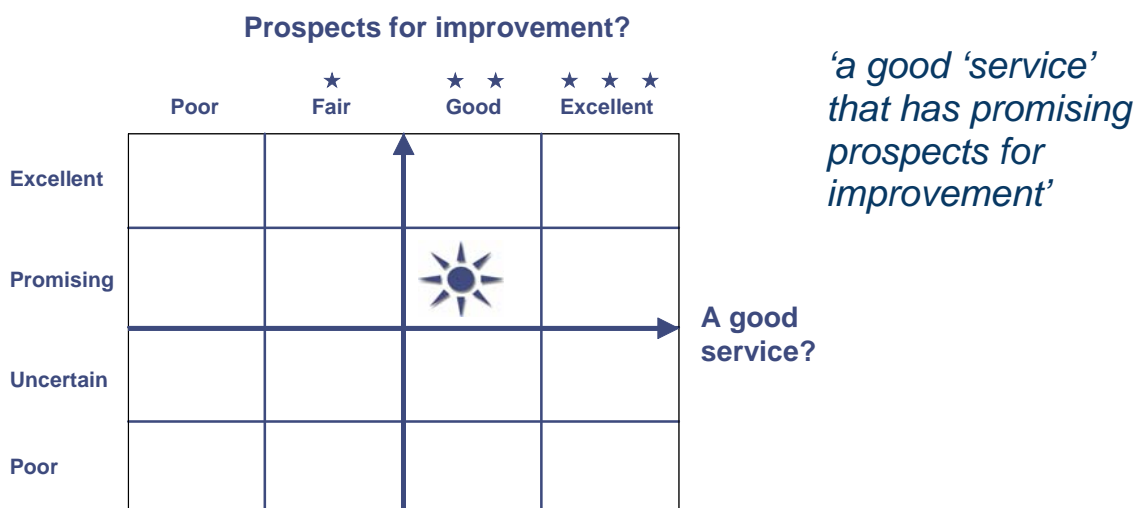
Summary

- 1 Ashford Borough Council is situated in south east England between London and the Channel Tunnel. In the 1960s, Ashford was identified as an 'expanded town' to accommodate London overspill and then as a growth area in the Kent Structure Plan. It has the fastest growing population in Kent, growing from 79,000 to 105,000 between 1971 and 2002. Communities other than 'white British' comprise 5 per cent of the borough population as compared to 11 per cent nationally.
- 2 The Council has 43 councillors. The Conservative group has control with 25 councillors. It employs 520 staff and its net overall budget for the year 2005/06 is £12 million. The Council currently has the lowest level of council tax in Kent.
- 3 The Council's *Corporate Plan 2003 - 2007* identifies priorities under four headings – a better future, a better environment, better lives and better services. A key priority is to respond to national proposals for sustainable growth at Ashford contained in the Sustainable Communities Plan and regional planning guidance. This proposes 31,000 new homes and 29,000 additional jobs by 2031.
- 4 The government has allocated £55 to £60 million additional public investment in the three years to March 2006 to pump prime growth at Ashford. The Council has joined with key development stakeholders to form the Ashford's Future Partnership. With support from a range of consultants the Partnership is producing a masterplan and delivery plans to guide the project.

Scoring the 'service' – the Council's approach to sustainable growth

5 We have assessed the Council as providing a 'good', two-star 'service' that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Scoring chart¹: Ashford Borough Council – Achieving Sustainable Growth - Ashford's Future



6 The Council's approach to sustainable growth is good because:

- ◆ it has clear high-level aims for sustainable growth, which reflect the national sustainability agenda, have been validated through consultation and have unanimous support within the Council;
- ◆ it has detailed planning policies which reflect sustainability criteria and it has worked to keep these up-to-date through supplementary planning guidance;
- ◆ it has provided effective leadership and support to the Ashford's Future partnership and it has helped to deliver a complex work programme;
- ◆ although some development outcomes reflect decisions made prior to Ashford's Future and do not always meet the Council's current aspirations for sustainable growth, it has started to produce more sustainable outcomes for local people including:
 - ◆ overall levels of housing growth to reflect the demands of the Sustainable Communities Plan;
 - ◆ a good supply of affordable housing;
 - ◆ some sustainable transport solutions;
 - ◆ improvements to the public domain; and
 - ◆ sustainable design solutions.

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

7 However:

- ◆ the Council's aims for tackling disadvantage within the existing Ashford community are not yet clearly defined; and
- ◆ the Council does not yet have an overall project plan for achieving sustainable growth.

8 The prospects for improvement in achieving sustainable growth are good because:

- ◆ the Council is demonstrating ownership of problems and willingness to change its approach;
- ◆ it is providing strong and effective leadership;
- ◆ it has embraced external challenge from residents, other stakeholders and consultants;
- ◆ it has identified the key strategic risks to achieving sustainable growth and it is working with partners to address these effectively;
- ◆ it has plans to address existing weaknesses including project management arrangements; and
- ◆ it is using masterplanning effectively to couple future infrastructure requirements with housing and employment growth.

9 However there remain some weaknesses the Council needs to address:

- ◆ its focus on community development has been weak compared to planning for physical structures; and
- ◆ it has not identified the human and financial resources that it will need in the medium to long-term to support partnership and secure sustainable growth.

The Council takes the view that the Government should recognise the special revenue pressures facing growth areas and provide additional support. It is important for the Council to establish whether this aspiration is realistic, so that it can proceed with its long-term financial planning.

Recommendations

- 10 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council should:
- ◆ take a long-term view of the staff and the skills that it needs to support the sustainable growth in Ashford, particularly in its planning and legal services and also its own sustainable growth projects. It should use this to develop a workforce plan to ensure that it can continue to provide an effective contribution to Ashford's Future;
 - ◆ assess the long-term implications of sustainable growth on its financial resources. It should use this to develop a medium-long-term financial strategy that enables it to meet the Council's human resource costs, identified above, and provide resources to serve a larger population, including the much expanded public domain identified in the draft masterplan;
 - ◆ work with its partners in the Local Strategic Partnership to develop a clearer understanding of the nature and location of local disadvantage within the borough and to engage effectively with 'hard to reach' groups within the community. It should use this intelligence to set out a plan which shows how it proposes to integrate its planning and social inclusion agendas to address disadvantage and ensure that all Ashford residents have an opportunity to benefit from Ashford's Future;
 - ◆ keep arrangements for liaison and joint working with the Local Strategic Partnership under review to help ensure that the planning agenda is properly integrated with the wider health and community agendas as Ashford's Future moves into the delivery phase and funding evolves through the Public Service Delivery Board and Local Area Agreement; and
 - ◆ ensure that the proposed arrangements for project management and for measuring sustainable development outcomes are properly resourced and embedded to provide effective project and performance management across the partnership.

- 11 We would like to thank the staff of Ashford Borough Council, particularly Geoff Luker and Simon Bandy, who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

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Report

Context

- 12 This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission (the Commission) following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

The locality

- 13 Ashford Borough Council is situated in south east England on the main road and rail links between London and the Channel Tunnel. It is the largest of the 12 districts in Kent with an area of 58,000 hectares. It includes downland to the east and the low Weald to the west. A large part of the downland falls within the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The area has a significant built heritage with many conservation areas and about 3,000 listed buildings. The town of Ashford has medieval origins.
- 14 In the 1960s Ashford was identified as an 'expanded town' to accommodate London overspill and then as a growth area in the Kent Structure Plan. This reflected its good transportation links and a plentiful supply of potential development land without fundamental constraints.
- 15 As a result, Ashford Borough has the fastest growing population in Kent. It increased from 79,000 to 105,000 between 1971 and 2002. Just over half of the present population (57,000) live in the main town and service centre of Ashford. The remainder live in the market town of Tenterden (7,500) and the surrounding downland and wealden villages. Communities other than 'white British' comprise 5 per cent of the borough population as compared to 11 per cent nationally.
- 16 Ashford has a relatively strong economy compared to the other east Kent districts, which are weak compared to the regional economy. Unemployment levels (1.6 per cent) and the proportion of the working age population claiming benefit (1.5 per cent) are similar to the regional average, though average earnings (£421 per week) are about 5 per cent lower. The proportion of people employed in agriculture, manufacturing, construction and distribution is higher than the regional average, whilst the proportion in the service sector is lower. Overall levels of deprivation are below average compared to other councils in England.
- 17 These figures mask significant variations in prosperity and living conditions within the borough. There is a clear distinction between the generally affluent rural area and the less prosperous communities within the town of Ashford. Within the urban area there are some pockets of disadvantage, notably the Stanhope housing estate.

The Council

- 18 The Council has 43 councillors. The Conservative group has control with 25 councillors, many of them representing the more affluent rural wards. A single party executive governs the business of the Council. It is supported by policy advisory groups (PAGs) which consider policy issues on a task and finish basis.
- 19 The Council's overall net budget for the year 2005/06 is £12 million. It employs 520 staff. The Council currently has the lowest level of council tax in Kent and its corporate plan aims to keep Ashford's council tax levels among the lowest in Kent.

- 20 The Council's *Corporate Plan 2003 - 2007* identifies priorities under four headings – a better future, a better environment, better lives and better services. These priorities include:
- ◆ lay the foundations to ensure growth in and around Ashford is sustainable – creating healthy, active, prosperous and creative communities;
 - ◆ prepare a new Local Development Framework (LDF) for the borough by 2006;
 - ◆ work with partners to transform the quality of Ashford town centre;
 - ◆ protect and improve the local environment;
 - ◆ encourage a new approach to public transport;
 - ◆ work with partners to improve community safety and reduce the fear of crime;
 - ◆ regenerate Stanhope;
 - ◆ improve the borough's parks and open spaces;
 - ◆ modernise the Stour Centre by 2006;
 - ◆ improve services and value for money – responding to community needs and aspirations; and
 - ◆ work with the strategic partnership to secure new and improved schools and colleges.

Background to the sustainable growth agenda – Ashford's Future

- 21 In 2001, Regional Planning Guidance Note 9 (RPG9) identified Ashford as one of three or four potential areas for major growth in the South East. RPG9 indicated that Ashford Borough Council should work with the Regional Assembly (SEERA) to assess the 30 year capacity of the town to accommodate new development.
- 22 In 2001, the Council led a team which commissioned a study called 'Ashford's Future' to assess the future scale of growth at Ashford. This was to incorporate sustainability considerations and an urban renaissance for Ashford. The brief called for community involvement and for links to an emerging community strategy. The study follows 14 guiding principles established by the commissioning team.
- 23 Having assessed three potential development scenarios, Ashford's Future study recommended a 'middle scenario', with a target of 31,000 new homes and 29,000 additional jobs, by 2031. This implies a doubling of development levels during the plan period.
- 24 In February 2003 the Government published its Communities Plan which shows how it intends to deal with a number of key national housing and planning issues including meeting demands for new housing, improving the 'liveability' of communities and protecting the countryside. This confirmed Ashford as a growth area with growth targets in line with the *Ashford's Future Study*. £55 to £60 million additional public sector investment has already been allocated over the three years to March 2006 to pump prime the project. This is principally capital funding. The Council estimates that the total infrastructure requirement over the 30 years of the project is about £2 billion.
- 25 The study recommendations have been fed into regional planning processes and now form the basis for a masterplanning exercise, which was due to be concluded in early 2005.

26 In the meantime, the Council is constructing a delivery structure. This comprises of the following.

- ◆ Ashford's Future Delivery Board – comprising high-level representatives from partner agencies, overseeing and coordinating the delivery of Ashford's Future. This work includes approving policy and key documents and performance management. The Board has no legal status. It acts through the partner organisations and a Business Plan for Delivery.
- ◆ Delivery Co-ordination Team – the 'core team' - a technical team whose members are employed by the Borough Council, but answerable to the Delivery Board. The team is managed by a managing director employed by the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA), but also answerable to the Board. The team formulates policies and proposals for the approval of the Board and coordinates implementation of the delivery plans with partners. It forms the link between partners, the community and other stakeholders, challenging and inspiring to get the best outcomes. It will also have a performance management role.
- ◆ Delivery Managers Group – responsible for providing strategic advice to the Delivery Board and chaired by the managing director of the Delivery Co-ordination Team.
- ◆ Masterplanning Group – chaired by English Partnerships. It is accountable to the Board and responsible for the day to day management of the masterplanning process. It is responsible for commissioning consultants and draws on staff from the Delivery Co-ordination Team and the partners.

27 The partnership has identified the need for a number of key documents:

- ◆ Interim Delivery Plan – submitted to ODPM in May 2003 with three year actions and targets, including further studies and preparatory work. It identifies the lead partner for each project.
- ◆ The masterplan (due for completion early 2005) - will take a broad look at the development of Ashford, addressing economic development, community development and wider aesthetic considerations.
- ◆ Long-Term Delivery Plan (in course of preparation) – a 30 year plan with a focus on the first 15 years, reflecting further investigations undertaken as part of the Interim Delivery Plan. This will include outputs from the Masterplanning Group.
- ◆ Business Plan for Delivery (in course of preparation) – establishing a business case and funding arrangements for delivery plan proposals. The overall funding requirement for the project is about £2 billion.
- ◆ Contract for Delivery (not yet drafted) – binding the partners together to build certainty over delivery arrangements and service standards.

How good is the Council's approach to sustainable growth?

Are the aims clear and challenging?

28 Inspectors look to see how the Council has agreed the key aims for sustainable growth, how clear these aims are to local people and whether they reflect the corporate aims of the organisation as a whole. Aims need to be challenging, address local needs and support national objectives.

29 The Council's aims for sustainable growth are set out in:

- ◆ the *Ashford Borough Local Plan*, adopted in 2000 but prepared in the mid-1990s prior to Ashford's Future to reflect an earlier growth agenda;
- ◆ fourteen 'guiding principles', approved in 2001 to establish the terms for the Council's participation in the national growth proposals;
- ◆ the Council's *Corporate Plan 2003 - 2007*; and
- ◆ the *Ashford Borough Community Strategy 2004 - 2014*.

In addition the Council has project aims which describe what the Council must do to create a robust masterplan for Ashford's Future and a delivery mechanism to realise it.

30 The Council has established clear and relevant high level aims for sustainable growth. Fourteen guiding principles were agreed by the Council in 2001 and can be summarised as follows.

- ◆ Achieving development in a sustainable way, making the best use of land, encouraging sustainable transport and taking opportunities to minimise waste and encourage recycling.
- ◆ Making best use of existing infrastructure and maximising development opportunities in the existing urban area.
- ◆ Achieving an urban renaissance at Ashford, including high standards of urban design in new development.
- ◆ Matching housing and employment growth.
- ◆ Supporting the wider regeneration of east Kent and other regeneration strategies, including Thames Gateway.
- ◆ Respecting environmental constraints including countryside of strategic importance, flood risk areas, water supply limits and air quality standards.
- ◆ Protecting village communities from the potential negative effects of development.

31 These principles reflect the national sustainability agenda and balance social, environmental and economic considerations. They establish a set of conditions for local participation in the national sustainable communities initiative and take the form of a promise to deliver growth in a way that will benefit local people. They are long-term aims and although they do not include specific targets, they do start to provide a framework for assessing the quality of outcomes and they will help local people to hold the Council to account.

- 32 Since 2001, the Council has built the growth agenda into its strategic priorities. Laying the foundations for sustainable growth lies at the head of the priorities in the Council's corporate plan (see paragraph 20 above). There is also an explicit commitment to preparing a new LDF by 2006 to give effect to this priority. Nearly all the Council's other priorities relate in one way or another to the growth agenda. This is reflected also in service plans and service managers understand its importance to the Council and the shape of future service delivery. The Council therefore has a clear strategic framework in place to guide it.
- 33 The Council has used consultation effectively to validate its approach. It launched a consultation exercise in 2001 built around extensive publicity of the guiding principles and three growth options. These options were:
- ◆ a continuation of existing growth levels to deliver 20,500 dwellings by 2031;
 - ◆ an increase in existing growth levels to deliver 31,000 dwellings by 2031; and
 - ◆ high growth, to the maximum feasible within local constraints, to deliver 42,000 dwellings by 2031.

The Council supported the middle option, arguing that this was the best way of tackling the existing problems of the town with its infrastructure constraints and deficiencies in social, cultural and community facilities. Some 2,000 people responded to newspaper publicity, leafleting and special events. Forty per cent supported the low growth option, 40 per cent the medium growth option and 20 per cent the high growth option. These results reflect a diversity of view within the community, but they show significant support for an increase in the rate of growth. This has provided the Council with a mandate for its approach.

- 34 The Council's leadership has used this mandate to secure unanimous support within the Council for the growth agenda. This was confirmed formally at a meeting of the Council on 17 October 2002. A range of councillors were interviewed in the course of the inspection and despite tensions over local impacts and tactical issues, they generally understood and accepted the growth agenda. This is important because partners need to know that the Council is committed to Ashford's Future and they can expect sustained support from it.
- 35 The Council's clarity of view has helped it to engage effectively with government and other stakeholders. It has responded very positively to the national sustainable communities agenda and contributed effectively to the panel set up by the government to examine *Regional Planning Guidance Note 9*, which sets out regional planning policies to 2016. The Council has maintained an effective dialogue with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and this has helped it to develop regional planning aims and the *Sustainable Communities Plan* in accordance with the principles that it has established to guide the growth of Ashford.
- 36 The Council has used its guiding principles to secure the support of other stakeholders and provide a starting point for community partnership. The Council's aims for sustainable growth are reflected in the *Ashford Borough Community Strategy*. The strategy identifies the growth agenda as the key challenge for the partnership and individual service themes take account of the need to serve a growing population. This is an important link between Ashford's Future and the wider community partnership.

- 37 The guiding principles have also provided a sound basis for more detailed work on the growth agenda through the Ashford's Future Partnership. They have provided a clear starting point for the network of studies that underpin the emerging *Greater Ashford Development Framework*, the *Town Centre Development Framework* and the projects in the *Interim Delivery Plan*. This has enabled the Council to ensure consistency of vision and approach across the partnership, despite the range of different stakeholders involved.
- 38 In the meantime, the Council has effective planning policies to guide development. The *Ashford Borough Local Plan* was adopted in 2000, though it has its origins in the mid 1990s. It remains appropriate in general terms, having been prepared to address an earlier growth agenda. Policies are clearly stated and they reflect the sustainability principles in Ashford's Future. For example, the plan seeks to make the best use of urban land, reduce the need to travel, manage environmental impacts, reinforce the town centre and secure community facilities to meet the needs of a growing population. The plan has a short time horizon to 2006, but it is as up to date as many local plans in Kent and it has a sufficient reserve of development land. The plan is important because it provides a serviceable framework for considering development proposals until the Council can adopt the LDF.
- 39 However, the Council does have weaknesses in its aims for tackling disadvantage within the existing community. The 'guiding principles' of Ashford's Future do not explicitly address the need to use the growth of Ashford to tackle pockets of disadvantage in the existing community. The Community Strategy identifies social inclusion as an issue, but the action plan focuses on the need for further research. It does not provide a clear framework for action by the Council. Stakeholders and some staff feel that, alongside the growth agenda, community cohesion is a lower priority for the Council. The Audit Commission's *Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) Report January 2004* identified weaknesses in this area, particularly the lack of a social cohesion policy. The Council's aims in this area are not therefore clear and neither councillors nor managers have been able to articulate them in the course of the inspection. There is a widespread belief that the growth proposals will automatically address existing community cohesion problems, although there is no evidence to support this.

Does the Council meet its aims for sustainable growth?

- 40 Having considered the aims that the Council has set for sustainable growth, inspectors make an assessment of how well it is meeting these aims. Ashford's Future is a long-term project and the Council can only realise its aims gradually over the next 25 years. Inspectors have assessed the Council's progress in agreeing the vision, leading the partnership and supporting the work of the partnership, including masterplanning. They have also looked at the impact of this work on local people, particularly signs that the Council is meeting its growth targets and delivering more sustainable outcomes.

Agreeing the vision and setting the agenda

- 41 The Council has responded very positively to the national sustainable communities agenda. It has been proactive, establishing an appropriate level of sustainable growth, setting out principles to guide that growth and securing public support for its selected growth option. It has engaged effectively with ODPM and the regional planning bodies to ensure that a locally acceptable growth scenario was reflected in the *Sustainable Communities Plan* and also that resources were made available to fund the work of the Ashford's Future Partnership. This leadership has been an important foundation of the Partnership and it is also important for local people to see that their Council is guiding events rather than being driven by them.
- 42 The Council has refined its aims and set out a clear agenda for Ashford's Future. The *Overarching Report October 2002* draws together the initial research and identifies the key outputs required from the masterplanning process. It starts to spell out the implications of growth and of different patterns of development. The report identifies specific infrastructure requirements, outline costs and potential sources of funding. It recommends a delivery model for Ashford's Future, an indicative timetable for implementation and an action plan comprising 28 pieces of preparatory work. The Overarching Report set an agenda for the Council and the partnership, which has carried Ashford's Future forward since 2002.
- 43 The Council has worked effectively to develop its policies within the framework of the Ashford Borough Local Plan and emerging sustainable communities agenda. For example, it published supplementary planning guidance in July 2004 on the developer contributions required to give effect to the proposals in *South Ashford Transportation Study*. These include green travel plans and funding for new bus routes. It has developed detailed policies for individual sites which start to pick up the sustainability principles of Ashford's Future. For example, the Ashford Barracks development brief is based around seven sustainability objectives, including stakeholder involvement in design; reducing the need to travel and minimising resource use. The brief is prepared jointly with the two developers and its provisions therefore have their support. In this way, the Council is laying the foundations for more sustainable outcomes, in advance of the local development framework.

Leading the partnership

- 44 The Council has provided effective leadership to the Ashford's Future Partnership. The Leader of the Council chairs the Board and the chief executive also plays a leading role. Council managers contribute actively to the delivery managers group. Partners agree that the informal structure of the partnership has been effective, each taking responsibility for individual pieces of within the framework established by the Board through the *Interim Delivery Plan*. They acknowledge that the Council has played a key role in assembling the partnership, establishing its terms of reference and co-ordinating its activities. They regard the Council as a good partner and there is broad agreement on the way forward.

45 The Council has established satisfactory links between the Ashford's Future Partnership and the wider community partnership. The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) was formed after the key decisions had been made on Ashford's Future and it has set its agenda around these decisions. The Board is concerned to restrict its own membership to agencies with a key role in producing and implementing the masterplan and this has restricted LSP involvement. The Primary Care Trust (PCT) and the voluntary sector are not formally represented on the Board. At present:

- ◆ the Council is the primary link between the Ashford's Future Board and the LSP - regularly briefing the LSP on the activities of the Board; and
- ◆ some LSP members are actively involved in Ashford's Future working groups and some are also represented on the delivery managers group.

These arrangements appear to work in practice. LSP members are generally content to let the Delivery Board take the lead in the Ashford's Future master planning exercise. The Board has achieved a high degree of focus on its task and there are clearly some risks in extending its membership. In the longer-term, as the LSP matures and Ashford's Future moves into the delivery phase, this may not be the most effective way of integrating health and social exclusion issues into the growth agenda.

46 The Council has helped the Board to increase its executive capacity by supporting a 'core technical team'. This is administered by the Council, but reports directly to the Board under the direction of a managing director. Its role is to coordinate the activities of the Board and its partners and to provide specialist technical support across projects. The core team is providing specialist advice on, for example, sustainability, social inclusion and economic development issues and it is starting to develop its coordination role. The Council has seconded key staff to the core team and works constructively with it to advance Ashford's Future. After some initial problems in defining roles and responsibilities, a productive working relationship is building up between the Council and the core team. This is critical if the Board is to be supported effectively.

47 The Council has extended its own capacity effectively. Ashford's Future is a major planning exercise and Ashford is a small council with limited resources. It has, through the Ashford's Future Partnership and individual partners, procured substantial external expertise to undertake the masterplanning exercise and develop the delivery arrangements. Council planners have had a coordinating role, providing a local perspective and maintaining contact with local democratic processes. The Council has also used planning delivery grant to increase its staff resources in the critical area of planning. In this way, the Borough Council has dealt with a significant capacity constraint while still discharging its central responsibility to local communities.

48 There are however limitations in the Council's project management of its partnership working. Although the *Overarching Report* provides a framework for the project, the Council does not have an overall project plan or programme drawing the projects together. The interim delivery plan identifies a series of projects necessary to advance Ashford's Future, but it is essentially a bid for resources and it does not include a detailed programme and it does not show the interrelationship between projects. Although this does not appear to have inhibited the overall progress of Ashford's Future, the Council's failure to establish its project office in advance of projects coming forward shows how a lack of project planning can expose it to unnecessary risk.

Partnership outcomes

- 49 The Council has worked effectively with its partners to create the building blocks for Ashford's Future. The work programme has proceeded generally in accordance with the programme outlined in the *Overarching Report 2002*.
- ◆ An *Interim Delivery Plan* was published in May 2003 identifying key projects for the development of Ashford's Future, funded by ODPM. Twenty projects are now underway and of these sixteen are progressing to timescale and four are progressing, but with some difficulties. Projects range from the economic vision and voluntary sector compact to physical projects such as the redesign of the town centre ring road and land assembly for major schemes. This is good progress overall.
 - ◆ The masterplan is now available in draft, addressing the guiding principles agreed by the Council and setting out firm proposals for achieving Ashford's Future.
 - ◆ The Council has devised a development tariff to secure developer contributions to infrastructure costs.
 - ◆ The Board is preparing its Business Plan for Delivery.
 - ◆ The Council is promoting discussion of delivery mechanisms.

The project has therefore made substantial progress since October 2002 and the publication of the *Overarching Report* and the partnership is well placed to move forward into the delivery phase.

- 50 The Council is validating its proposals through sustainability appraisal. It is developing an assessment framework through its Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to satisfy EU criteria. It has used this process to identify sustainability deficiencies in its emerging plans and it can show that it is addressing these. For example, it has amended development patterns to reduce impact on the floodplain and sensitive habitats.
- 51 The Council has consulted regularly and effectively. It has used a 'stakeholder database' to help it manage consultation and it has used a variety of consultation techniques. These have included large scale questionnaires, high profile events, street events and workshops. Consultees enjoyed exploring development options using a board game with a map and various types of development tiles and this is a good example of innovation in engagement. The Council is carrying consultation forward using the 'enquiry by design' process, which brings stakeholders together to help develop and refine detailed planning proposals. In this way, the Council has validated each stage in the production of the masterplan and the development of detailed planning proposals.
- 52 Consultation has however focussed on people who are interested in the project, and this has limited the total number of people effectively engaged and the range of views represented. Although it has engaged with young people through schools and consulted with some minority groups, for example the Asian Society, it has not had a strategy for engaging hard to reach groups. Some stakeholders feel that more could have been done to train and use community representatives as ambassadors for the project. Although the Council has consulted extensively, it cannot be sure that it understands the views of the whole Ashford community.
- 53 The Council is not currently measuring development outcomes to assess the impact of its actions. It is proposing to extend the SEA to provide a tool for measuring sustainability outcomes and developing a performance management system, but this is still at an early stage. This makes it difficult for it to make an assessment of its current sustainability performance.

- 54 Finally, the Council is still at an early stage in developing its approach to social inclusion. It has commissioned research to identify problems of local disadvantage and access to services, but this is still work in progress. It has used councillor policy advisory groups (PAGs) to report to the executive on community cohesion issues and the Council now has a community cohesion action plan. The PAG reports and the community cohesion action plan are essentially project plans to develop a social cohesion strategy. They do not clearly identify social inclusion problems or set out proposals to deal with them.

Sustainable development outcomes

- 55 The Council can show a range of outcomes which meet its sustainability objectives. These are partly a result of existing plans and processes, particularly the *Ashford Borough Plan 2000*, but also as a result of new practices, some derived from Ashford's Future.
- ◆ The Council is achieving overall growth levels similar to those anticipated in the first phase of Ashford's Future to 2016. Housing completion rates over the last three years have averaged about 800 units per year and there is currently a substantial reserve of sites with planning permission to secure continuity of provision until the LDF comes into force in 2006. In this way the Council is managing an orderly transition from the existing structure plan growth strategy and the *Borough Plan 2000* to Ashford's Future.
 - ◆ The Council has worked effectively to deliver affordable housing. Assisted by strong policies and the opportunities presented by large housing sites the Council expects to deliver 417 units in the three years to the end of 2004/05 against a target of 100 per year. This is substantial provision compared to other councils and it is an important contribution to a sustainable community.
 - ◆ The Council has used a variety of techniques to tackle housing problems on its Stanhope Estate. Stanhope is a council estate with its origins in the Greater London Council (GLC) Town Development Scheme of the 1960s. It has been a high profile problem for the Council, with a mix of physical problems in the stock and community cohesion issues. The Council has sponsored a number of community development projects funded by the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) and it has facilitated a county council funded family support centre (the Ray Allen Centre). It is embarking on a substantial Private Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme to improve the physical condition of the stock and the external environment in Stanhope. These are important examples of investment in the existing community alongside Ashford's Future.
 - ◆ Sustainability considerations are being reflected into more detailed planning. Development control has started to produce more sustainable outcomes using the new development briefs discussed above, inquiry by design and design coding. The most recent development on the Barracks site includes higher housing densities and a variety of environmental measures. Later phases will include mixed uses and other facilities to increase levels of self containment and reduce the need for travel.
 - ◆ New development is also starting to improve the sustainable transport network in Ashford. The Council has secured contributions to complete elements of the strategic footway and cycleway network linking outlying residential developments at Park Farm and the Barracks to jobs and services in the town centre. It has also secured capital funding for enhanced bus services within the town, though there is no 'quality bus partnership' as yet to exploit this fully.

- ◆ The Council has achieved some new community facilities through partnership working and developer contributions. The proposed Singleton Environment Centre is an example of a new community facility with office accommodation to provide an income stream and a sustainable future. New facilities have been provided at the Julie Rose Stadium in lieu of freestanding community facilities on the adjoining Little Burton Farm development. The Youth Club and Health Centre at St Stephens Walk is an example of constructive partnership working with health and education authorities.
- ◆ Finally, some of the early Ashford's Future projects are starting to come forward. Work on parks and the green corridors around the town centre is proceeding in phases. The Victoria Park Scheme is an early example of improvements to the public realm. Schemes like this are important to give the public and partners confidence in the project and to establish high standards of design to provide a template for later projects.

56 Sustainability outcomes do not always meet the Council's current sustainability criteria, however. There are substantial lead times in planning and implementing new development proposals and Ashford is starting from a difficult position. For example:

- ◆ the pattern of development established in successive local plans is not particularly sustainable, with a high proportion of development being on greenfield sites, built to a relatively low density and remote from the town centre. There has been little higher density development in and around the town centre;
- ◆ there is no data on the balance between employment and housing, but there is a general acceptance that growth is still housing led and that this is leading to additional commuting to employment centres in London and elsewhere in Kent. Recent development on the Barracks site and adjoining residential sites have led to additional traffic congestion around M20 junction 9 as the new residents make their daily journey to work;
- ◆ the Council has had difficulty securing community facilities and educational provision in step with new development and the town centre is not yet providing a comprehensive range of retail services. As a result local people still travel regularly to shop at other centres; and
- ◆ outside the masterplanning process, the Council's community development focus is largely on the Stanhope estate. It has not described problems in other areas and it does not have programmes to address them.

These difficulties are partly the result of old planning policies and limitations in the national planning system, but they remain as challenges for the Council and the wider Ashford's Future Partnership.

Summary

- 57 The Council has clear high-level aims for sustainable growth, which reflect the national sustainability agenda, have been validated through consultation and have unanimous support within the Council. It has detailed planning policies in the *Ashford Borough Local Plan* which reflect sustainability criteria and it has worked to keep these up-to-date through supplementary planning guidance.
- 58 The Council has been very successful in assembling the resources to respond to the sustainable communities challenge and it has provided effective leadership and support to the Ashford's Future partnership. It has helped to manage a complex work programme and maintain the necessary momentum to drive the project forward, producing key outputs such as an interim delivery plan, the masterplan and a new approach to infrastructure funding.
- 59 Its clear sustainability aims have enabled the Council to start producing more sustainable outcomes for local people including overall levels of growth that reflect the demands of Ashford's Future, a good supply of affordable housing, some sustainable transport solutions, improvements to the public domain and more sustainable design solutions.
- 60 However, the Council does not yet have an overall project plan for Ashford's Future and its aims for tackling disadvantage within the existing Ashford community are not yet clearly defined. The Council still needs to integrate the social inclusion and planning agendas. Consultation is generally effective, but it does not systematically engage hard to reach groups.
- 61 The Council is not monitoring the sustainability outcomes and this makes it difficult for it to evaluate the success of its policies and the risk of service failure. It is clear however that some outcomes from the *Ashford Borough Local Plan 2000* do not meet current sustainability criteria, mainly because of the long lead in to new development. For example, a high proportion of new housing is on greenfield sites and growth is still housing driven, increasing journey to work distances.

What are the prospects for achieving sustainable growth?

Does the Council demonstrate ownership of problems and a willingness to change?

- 62 The evidence in the first judgement shows that the Council has ownership of the difficult sustainable growth issue by taking a lead on the growth proposals in RPG9 and also in developing the approach to preparing the LDF. It has responded promptly to central government and regional planning guidance in RPG9 and the *Sustainable Communities Plan* - engaging consultants to extend the Council's capacity, forming the Ashford Strategic Partnership and securing unanimous political support for the Council's approach. It led the capacity study (Ashford's Future Study) prepared to define the regional growth proposals for Ashford and the masterplanning (Greater Ashford Development Framework) that followed on from this. By taking the lead in the formation of both national and local policy, the Council has demonstrated its commitment to leading and achieving the sustainable growth of Ashford.
- 63 The Council has shown that it is capable of taking difficult strategic decisions. Embracing the government's growth proposal was a difficult decision in itself. There are clear political risks, particularly since public acceptance of the growth proposal is contingent upon delivery in accordance with the Council's 14 guiding principles. Some detailed proposals also show the Council is able to take a strategic view that is sometimes at odds with local opinion. For example, the Council is promoting the opening of Victoria Road to provide a new road link around the town centre and enable town centre improvements. This is a contentious proposal and it is still subject to a statutory decision-making process, but it shows that the Council is capable of providing strong leadership to secure strategic improvements.
- 64 The Council has used other stakeholders and specialist consultants to challenge and inform its approach to sustainable growth. A good range of stakeholders have influenced and continue to influence the shape of Ashford's plans including residents, businesses and other service providers. Consultants have been used throughout the process to challenge the Council and bring in expertise, for example to prepare the masterplan. This has resulted in the creation of conditions for growth that reflect the aspirations of stakeholders and support broad sustainability criteria.
- 65 The Council is using policy advisory groups (PAGs) to develop its approach. PAGs have looked at the way that the Council is developing its approach to Ashford's Future and also social inclusion. They have kept a cross-section of councillors involved in policy development and this has helped to maintain political consensus.
- 66 The Council has demonstrated willingness to change its plans. It has invited challenge through public engagement at a strategic level (Ashford's Future consultations and workshops) and at an operational level, for example 'inquiry by design'. Members of the public and other stakeholders have been able to influence policies and plans during their development, and this engagement makes it more likely that the Council will succeed in building the town to reflect the aspirations of the community.

- 67 However, the Council has been slow to accept its community leadership role in some areas where a multi agency approach is needed. This is particularly evident in the area of social inclusion and disadvantage as noted above. With the exception of the disadvantaged area of Stanhope, where it has invested through the government funded single regeneration budget (SRB) and is planning a major regeneration scheme through a private finance initiative (PFI), the Council has preferred to let others take the lead, especially the county council and health authority. As a result leadership and coordination of these themes has lagged behind the work on the physical regeneration of the town. For instance, the Council is still in the process of developing its social inclusion strategy, having only set priorities for action in December 2004, in response to the weakness identified in this area in the CPA. The OMAI Community Research Project provides the Council with an opportunity to coordinate a response to local disadvantage and to establish its leadership in the area of social inclusion as it has with the development agenda.
- 68 There has been limited activity so far to spread the benefits of Ashford's Future to east Kent and other regeneration areas. This is one of the Council's guiding principles for Ashford's Future, but responsibility for achieving it is unclear. There has been some joint working on the South East Plan and through the Channel Corridor Partnership. There is not yet, however, any tangible progress towards agreeing guidelines to spread the economic benefits of Ashford, or to manage any destructive competition.
- 69 The Council has still to make difficult financial planning decisions necessary to address the challenges of Ashford's Future. It has a track record of prudent financial planning within the context of its medium-term financial plan (MTFP). The Council's *Corporate Plan 2003 - 2007* contains a commitment to continue to have one of the lowest council taxes in Kent and its MTFP says that current council taxpayers should not contribute materially to the costs of Ashford's Future. Although funding responsibilities are shared with other stakeholders, there will be significant additional financial demands on the Council as a result of the growth of Ashford. These include the cost of providing the planning service, managing an expanding public domain and providing services to an expanding population. There is a tension between the Council's desire to contain council tax rises and the need to meet the needs of a growing population. The Council cannot plan ahead without resolving this tension, either by increasing resources and/or by prioritising services to contain expenditure within the envelope established by the MTFP.
- 70 It is not yet clear how the Council can best tackle this issue. Increasing population will bring increased council tax revenue and revenue support grant (RSG), but there is a time lag which will place an additional financial burden on the Council. In addition, the structure of the RSG means that additional financial support for the Council will not necessarily meet the full costs of the new population. The Council's financial projections show the need for significant annual savings or significant council tax increases for it to achieve its base budget. It takes the view that the Government should recognise the special revenue pressures facing growth areas and provide additional support. It is important for the Council to establish whether this aspiration is realistic, so that it can proceed with its long-term financial planning.

Is there a sustained focus on what matters?

- 71 The first part of this report identified a small number of weaknesses in the Council's current approach to Ashford's Future and it is important that these are addressed to support improvement. These are project management, the need to engage hard to reach groups, the approach to social inclusion and the need to monitor development outcomes and secure improvements in some areas. There are also wider risks and uncertainties identified in the *Overarching Report* and the panel report on RPG9. Ashford Borough Council has a two part role in addressing these risks. It must show leadership within the partnership to ensure that they are addressed and it must itself address those weaknesses and risks which fall within its own area of responsibility.
- 72 The Council is aware of most of the important weaknesses and risks that it needs to address and it has credible plans to address these.

Weakness in project planning

- 73 The Council and the partnership are addressing weaknesses in this area. The proposed *Business Plan for Delivery* will establish a project plan for Ashford's Future, which can be monitored by the partnership. The Council has identified a programme for preparation of the business plan by August 2005. The Local Development Scheme establishes a programme for preparation of the Local Development Framework. These key documents will provide a clear framework for management of Ashford's Future.

Weakness in measuring sustainable outcomes

- 74 The Council has clear proposals to address this weakness. It plans to use the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to provide a basis for a wider performance monitoring and management system. The partnership has engaged consultants to complete this work. This will enable the Council to test development outcomes against its policies and targets in the SEA and to amend its approach if necessary.

Weakness in delivering some sustainable outcomes

- 75 The masterplan sets new standards for sustainable growth and it effectively addresses existing performance shortfalls. Although risks remain, the Council is tackling these through the partnership and its approach is sound.

Weakness - engagement with hard to reach groups

- 76 The Council acknowledges the need to improve engagement with hard to reach groups. Its statement of community involvement for the LDF concludes that innovative approaches may be needed in relation to hard to reach groups, '*which have tended to be under represented in the planning process*'. It is also preparing a communications strategy, though this was not available at the time of the inspection. It is too early to say how effective these new approaches will be, but the Council has shown an awareness of the issue and it has the opportunity to review its approach and also to integrate consultation between projects.

Risk - the informal structure of the delivery board may compromise effective delivery

- 77 The structure of the delivery board is satisfactory at present. The present constitution of the Board has served it well over the first three years of Ashford's Future and there is limited enthusiasm among the partners for a more formal structure. The Council has engaged effectively with influential key partners who have the skills and resources to drive Ashford's Future forwards. The structure of the partnership is relatively straightforward with only one district council involved and a clear division of responsibilities between the partners. Stakeholders generally feel that the Board is well supported by the Council, the core team and the delivery managers groups and that it has the necessary influence to implement the delivery plan. There have been no significant performance failures that could have been avoided by a more formal partnership structure. There is therefore limited impetus for change, provided the partnership can build robust delivery mechanisms, particularly mechanisms for delivering infrastructure. This issue is dealt with below. The Council also needs to be sure that the interests of the health and voluntary sectors are adequately represented as Ashford's future moves forward into the delivery stage.

Risk - infrastructure may not proceed in pace with development demands

- 78 Infrastructure is the key delivery issue and the Council is working effectively with partners to address this. The partners have quantified infrastructure requirements in terms of cost and phasing. The Council has recognised that existing mechanisms cannot deliver infrastructure in a timely manner and it is proposing an infrastructure fund replenished by development tariffs to address this issue. By taking a comprehensive view of infrastructure requirements and funding opportunities through developer contributions, the Council is minimising the risks of infrastructure constraints.
- 79 The partnership is starting to consider alternative infrastructure delivery mechanisms to establish a clear contractual framework for infrastructure provision. Alternatives under consideration include local delivery companies funded by a consortium of developers to provide infrastructure and carry out the development. If satisfactory formal infrastructure delivery arrangements can be devised, the informal status of the Ashford's Future Board is less significant.
- 80 There are important, unresolved, infrastructure funding issues, but these lie largely outside the Council's control. Because of the long lead times involved, the partnership needs to commit funding for infrastructure in advance of the development decisions that trigger the infrastructure contribution. The Council does not have the resources to make this advance funding available, even if it accepted this to be its responsibility. This issue needs to be resolved to secure private sector confidence and investment in Ashford's Future.

Risk - the Council's planning and economic development services may not be able to meet demands placed upon them

- 81 Partners are generally concerned about the capacity of the Council to meet the demands that Ashford's Future will place on it. This is discussed fully in paragraphs 90 to 117 in the following section.

Risk - employment growth may not be sufficient to drive the expansion of Ashford and deliver a sustainable community

- 82 The Council recognises this risk and it is working constructively with partners to address it. This is a very real risk and the indications are that current growth is housing led and that this is creating a less sustainable Ashford in the short-term. This is despite the fact that the Council has allocated good quality employment sites close to the M20. Most stakeholders accept that this is likely to continue until the new housing creates a local labour market with the size and skills to support inward investment and employment expansion. A widely shared, but subjective, view is that this may take ten years. The Council has indicated that it will limit housing growth if employment targets are not met, though it may be difficult for it to do this if there is still a regional imperative to find new housing land and a need to spread infrastructure costs.
- 83 The Borough Council is doing what it can to address this risk through the partnership:
- ◆ it is commissioning studies with SEEDA² and Locate in Kent to identify developer requirements/perceptions and prepare a marketing programme to introduce Ashford's Future to the development community;
 - ◆ it is identifying and tackling infrastructure constraints through the business plan for delivery;
 - ◆ the interim delivery plan includes projects to improve the image of Ashford, particularly through town centre improvements. The Council is producing a town centre masterplan which addresses key issues, for example the constraining effect of the ring road and quality of the public realm; and
 - ◆ the partnership is assembling town centre development sites and it is in advanced discussions with developers to improve the retail offer.

Stakeholders feel that the Council has allocated sufficient high-quality employment land to support the necessary level of new development and that the partnership is taking the necessary steps to market it.

Risk - the supply of new housing has not consistently met structure plan targets

- 84 This is no longer a significant risk. Recent completion rates are now on a par with the first phase of Ashford's Future. The Council has sufficient reserves of unconstrained development land available to maintain this supply until the LDF comes into effect.

Risk - social infrastructure has fallen behind housing provision

- 85 The Council is addressing this through the infrastructure delivery mechanisms outlined above. Social infrastructure is identified in the masterplan with contributions through the infrastructure tariff.

² SEEDA is the South East of England Development Agency.

Risk - pressures to secure a satisfactory pace of development may make it difficult to deliver sustainable outcomes – to create a ‘beacon of sustainability’

- 86 The Council recognises this risk and it is working effectively to minimise it by ensuring that its requirements are clearly identified at an early stage through sustainability standards in the LDF. The Council is trying to establish an Ashford Standard for sustainability. Developers recognise the imperative to produce more sustainable development and provided they understand the requirements at the beginning of the negotiation process, they are prepared to respond. Most development land at Ashford is held on option so developers are able to set any abnormal costs against land prices.
- 87 There are also areas of weakness that the Council has not yet fully addressed.

Weakness - tackling disadvantage - meeting the needs of the existing population

- 88 Although the Council is starting to address this weakness, this work is still at an early stage and the Council's plans are incomplete. Emerging Ashford's Future proposals address community needs, but from a planning perspective. The masterplan identifies the need for new facilities and considers how they might be provided in the new neighbourhoods, but it does not consider existing social inclusion issues and the interventions that may need to be made, possibly at a neighbourhood level and probably in partnership with other agencies. The Council has not yet considered how disadvantaged communities can be helped to share in the benefits of Ashford's Future.
- 89 The Council has yet to clarify the nature of any community development work, the resource implications and potential funding sources. It does not have a social inclusion strategy to provide a framework for community development. The Council does have a project to map problems of disadvantage and access to services and it has prepared an action plan setting out a programme of further research. It has established a formal network of community organisations and its *Borough Compact*, launched in June 2004, provides a framework for a multi-agency approach to social inclusion. A voluntary sector co-ordinator is working to build capacity in the voluntary sector and integrate it more effectively into Ashford's Future. The Council is laying the foundations for more effective community engagement and community development, but it is too early to say what form this will take and how effective it will be.

Does the Council have the capacity and systems in place to achieve its plans?

- 90 Inspectors look for evidence that a council will deliver what it has set out in its plans. They look for a track record of managing change within the Council. The plans should also have sufficient support from councillors, management, staff, service users and other stakeholders, particularly those responsible for delivering it. Although the Council has challenges across the organisation, it is generally strong in the following areas.

Leadership

- 91 The sustainable growth agenda is being led effectively within the Council by the leader and chief executive (supported by the planning team). They are both members of the Ashford's Future Board and the LSP. Hands-on leadership by the political leader of the Council and the head of paid service is an appropriate level of commitment by the Council to such an important issue. The Council's leadership is recognised by other partners and this has enabled it to retain a greater degree of local democratic control over the growth agenda than would be available in a more formal partnership structure.

- 92 There is widespread awareness of the sustainable growth agenda within the Council. Corporate and service plans reflect high level Ashford's Future goals, although the one-page service plan format adopted by the Council restricts detailed reference to the issue, and not all teams work to a more detailed work plan. Staff and councillors are generally able to articulate the broad principles of the Council's policy for sustainable growth, though more detailed understanding is less clear.
- 93 However: there is still a staff perception that Ashford's Future is predominantly a planning issue and also that internal communications are not keeping staff and councillors adequately informed and engaged. There is plenty of information on the intranet but staff and councillors regard it as too detailed and inaccessible. Some staff commented that team briefings have been too infrequent and have not adequately covered growth issues. Both groups suggested a need for more concise bulletins. The Council's overall communications strategy has not yet been developed and this would help address this issue.

Partnership

- 94 The Council has a good record in partnership working with the LSP and the Ashford's Future Board. Other stakeholders are positive about the Council as a partner and there are many examples of successful joint working, for example the St Stephens Clinic and Ray Allen Centre. Where key partners are not represented on the Board, they have formed positive working relationships with delivery managers. For example, a health strategy overview group has been formed to oversee the health agenda. These positive relationships will help support the delivery phase of Ashford's growth which cannot be achieved by organisations working independently.
- 95 The Council recognises the need to refine its partnership working and it has created a new partnership manager post to facilitate this. Some partners are unclear about the respective roles of the LSP, the Council and the Board as Ashford's Future moves from planning to delivery phase. A partnership mapping exercise was conducted in 2002 and refreshing it now would help partners understand partnership roles and could lead to some rationalisation.
- 96 The Council is starting to build capacity in the voluntary sector to improve partnership working. A voluntary sector coordinator has been appointed through the partnership using ODPM funding. This has helped the Council to address community issues more effectively in the masterplan. For example the plan now includes provision for community development workers and capacity building in the voluntary sector. These are important foundations for more effective partnership working.

Corporate systems - performance management /risk management

- 97 The Council is addressing weaknesses in these areas through its CPA improvement plan. It has struggled to embed a culture of performance management. Progress on council projects is still not routinely reported to management, unless it has been identified as a 'key corporate project' or it is associated with a corporate performance indicator. Councillors are, however, now more actively involved in target setting and there are several actions in the improvement plan aimed at improving performance management.

- 98 The Council is working with the core team to build an effective performance monitoring and management system. The Council recognises that, as Ashford's Future moves into delivery, it needs a performance management system based on project outcomes as well as project progress. The partnership currently receives regular progress reports from partners, but it does not yet have a structure for measuring project outcomes against targets. The Council does not, for example, monitor development outcomes from its own local plan. The new system is to be built on the Strategic Environmental Assessment, will provide ongoing assessment of sustainability outcomes and provide a basis for performance management in this important area.
- 99 The Council is also implementing plans to improve project management. The Council recognises this weakness and it is reorganising to increase its project management capacity. A project office is being set up to provide a central team of experts which project managers can call upon. It will also provide programme management and risk management services to the core team. It is too early to say how effective this facility will be, but it is a useful recognition of existing weaknesses and it provides a basis for future development.
- 100 The Council has the corporate capacity to improve its systems. It has recently achieved beacon status for asset management and this is a positive indicator of the Council's capacity to implement new strategies successfully. The panel identified effective objective setting, cross-organisational working, partnership and consultation. These are important aids to improvement.
- 101 However, there are still weaknesses in risk management. Risk management is delivered at a corporate and a project level. The Council's 14 guiding principles and its conditional approach to the growth agenda are also a high level form of risk management. But, there is no overall assessment of risk or a record of risk identification, assessment, mitigation and control. The Council's corporate system was initiated by consultants in 2002 and refreshed in 2003 but has lapsed since. The Council exposes itself to unnecessary risk by not managing risk in a rigorous and systematic way.

Learning

- 102 The Council is learning from external networks. It belongs to several groups and networks including:

- ◆ MURBEX – Major Urban Extensions Network;
- ◆ LGA sustainable communities plan officers group;
- ◆ SEERA infrastructure concordat group;
- ◆ sustainable growth area group; and
- ◆ BURA focus group.

There is some concrete learning evident from these groups, particularly in the field of delivery mechanisms, but managers feel that it has generally served to confirm the course that Ashford has set.

- 103 It can show learning from consultants. For example in choosing the delivery mechanism of an informal partnership structure it was informed by a consultant who analysed the strengths and weaknesses of several available options. In another example, the design code for Ashford Barracks draws on the experience of English Partnerships in producing its Urban Design Compendium. It shows learning being used to improve working practises and to incorporate sustainability considerations into development control.

- 104 There are also examples of the Council learning from its own experience with major development schemes. It has dealt with a number of major schemes over the last decade for example the channel tunnel, the subsequent high speed rail link and the retail outlet village. This has taught the Council lessons about the level of staffing to support major projects, the need for strong political leadership and a rigorous approach to infrastructure provision. It has applied the last two learning points effectively to Ashford's Future.
- 105 However, there is no structured system to identify learning or to spread learning between projects and departments. It is important that staff are enabled to identify learning and share this across the organisation so that good practise is shared and the organisation learns collectively from its mistakes. Without a structured system for this, staff are unlikely to make time for it when already fully stretched.
- 106 There are important challenges for the Council in the following areas.

Staffing and skills

- 107 There is widespread recognition that staff are working to capacity. They see themselves as having to manage important Ashford's Future projects in addition to the 'day job'. Although there is not, in reality, a clear distinction between the two strands of work, new projects are having an adverse impact on regular service delivery. For example, the increased focus on community development has not been matched by extra resources within the regeneration team, which has been depleted by staff leaving. Lack of capacity in the communications team has delayed publication of the community strategy since July 2004. There are particular concerns about the capacity of the planning and legal departments to handle the large number of planning applications, planning agreements and development monitoring that will come forward as a result of Ashford's Future. The Council's capacity to deliver its share of the agenda could present a significant barrier to the initiative.
- 108 The Council has not undertaken a systematic audit of the key skills that it will require to deliver Ashford's Future. The Council has identified skills gaps, but in an ad hoc way. It does not have a workforce plan to provide a comprehensive picture of its requirements and to plan for the development of its workforce.
- 109 There are still some tensions between the Council, stakeholders and the core team over where responsibilities lie and where additional capacity should be employed. The separate location of the core team at Charter House is not universally accepted as beneficial, and the role of the core team, though clearer recently, is still not clear to all. All the key players need to be pulling together to make the partnership work.
- 110 However, the core team is providing additional skills to supplement skills within the Council and it is coordinating activity across the partnership. There are champions within the core team for:
- ◆ sustainability and innovation;
 - ◆ communications and marketing;
 - ◆ infrastructure; and
 - ◆ sustainable transport.

These champions are further supported by consultants for example helping develop a marketing image for the town and managing stakeholder engagement. The costs of these posts are met by ODPM, and as a result the Council can concentrate its efforts where its current skills lie.

- 111 Staff and councillors feel that they have good access to training opportunities. The Council has arranged visits to other developments for example Poundbury, but this has been focused on planning and design issues rather than broader sustainability considerations. Members of the planning committee and staff have been able to attend a four day urban design course. Skills development is important to increase the Council's preparedness for change and for implementation of the new agenda.
- 112 The Council is addressing some corporate weaknesses through its CPA improvement plan. It responded positively to the introduction of CPA, putting itself forward to be a pathfinder. It has responded to several weaknesses identified in its 2003 assessment, for instance the creation of a senior policy manager to coordinate corporate planning. The Council's record of self-improvement in response to challenge is a positive indication of its capacity to improve in the future.
- 113 The Council has increased capacity in its planning team. It has used Planning Delivery Grant resources to recruit additional staff, for example in urban design. The Council has 'mainstreamed' some of these costs and it has plans to raise additional resources through the new fees regime, and through developer contributions, to buy in additional support as required. It has already been using consultants to manage peaks in workflow. The indications are that developers will be prepared to make additional financial contributions, provided the Council can successfully procure the additional capacity in the private sector to meet performance commitments in its Major Sites Charter.
- 114 The Council is also reorganising its resources in Cultural Services to give greater focus to partnership working and delivery of social projects. This work is to be guided by a Policy Advisory Group of councillors. The Council has established a new post of Partnership Manager and it is re-casting the roles of three other posts. Although it is too early to say how effective these changes will be, they should help the Council to support the LSP and enable it to work more effectively as part of Ashford's Future.

Financial resources

- 115 Although the Council is debt free and its underlying financial position is fairly strong, it is constrained by having a low council tax base. The Council is currently seeking savings of about 7 per cent on its 2004/05 budget to meet its expenditure plans in 2005/06. As discussed in paragraph 69, there are likely to be significant financial demands on the Council as a result of the growth of Ashford. A growing population may not provide the Council with a proportional increase in revenue to pay for increased services. The Council is beginning to consider these issues and it has some flexibility because of its low council tax. However, it still has to make some difficult political decisions about council tax levels or service priorities, if it is to build a sustainable medium and longer-term financial strategy.
- 116 The Council's capital³ position is not robust. It has limited capital reserves after funding the Stour Centre project and it may have to invest to facilitate town centre redevelopment. The Council still owns its housing stock (in generally good condition) but the potential to use this as a source of capital for new projects is limited by the proposed PFI project. Ashford has, therefore, a very limited ability to contribute to other capital infrastructure costs.

³ Capital resources are held to invest to produce income or to acquire an asset with a significant life, for example a building. Revenue resources are for recurring expenditure, for example salaries, rent or other consumables.

117 The Council is, nevertheless, working effectively with ODPM to secure set up costs and pump priming funding. There are several projects underway funded by ODPM, including the core team and voluntary sector coordinator, consultants' costs and capital input through SEEDA to procure land. In this way the Council is able to show it can achieve real outcomes for Ashford's development and attract external funding. This will help generate confidence in the ability of the partnership to achieve the necessary investment.

Summary

- 118 The Council is demonstrating ownership of problems and a willingness to adapt its approach. The Council has underlying strengths, experience of handling a growth agenda, effective leadership and a strong track record of achievement in managing the masterplanning exercise. It has identified the main weaknesses in its current performance and the strategic risks to delivering sustainable growth. It is working effectively with partners to address these. In particular it has a good understanding of infrastructure requirements and it is starting to consider ways of providing it. These are good indicators of future improvement.
- 119 There are nevertheless some areas where it still lacks robust plans. Ashford is a small council addressing a large and complex task in partnership. It has yet to identify the financial and human resources that it will need to support Ashford's Future as it moves into the delivery phase. It is not clear about the implications of delivering services to an expanded town with a larger and more sophisticated public domain. It does not have a strategy for meeting these resource requirements.
- 120 There are also weaknesses in the Council's plans for dealing with social inclusion. The Council is working to improve its understanding of these issues, but this is still at an early stage and it lacks a clear plan to ensure that disadvantaged communities benefit fully from the growth proposals.

Appendices

The purpose of this inspection is to make two judgements. The first is how good is the Council's approach to delivering sustainable growth? The second is what are the prospects for achieving sustainable growth? We carried out a range of activities to enable us to reach our judgements.

Documents reviewed

Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed nearly 100 documents provided by the Council. These included the following.

- ◆ A self-assessment prepared by the Council
- ◆ Ashford Borough Community Strategy – Ashford Partnership 2004

Corporate plans and strategies

- ◆ Ashford Borough Council Corporate Plan – 2003 to 2007
- ◆ Ashford Borough Council Budget Consultation 2005/06
- ◆ Financial Planning and Ashford's Future – Internal audit review March 2005
- ◆ Ashford Borough Local Plan (June 2000)
- ◆ Ashford Borough Compact
- ◆ Ashford Cultural Strategy
- ◆ Memo from the Chief Executive to the Leader of the Council - Delivering Excellence Locally - February 2005
- ◆ CPA improvement plan update January 2005
- ◆ Corporate plan action plan update January 2005
- ◆ Service Plans
- ◆ Restructuring Report – December 2004

Preliminary studies and responses

- ◆ Ashford Borough Council's response to the revisions to Circular 1/97
- ◆ ABC Response to Draft RPG9 March 2000 – Committee Agenda 30 March 2000
- ◆ Ashford's Future Study Brief – Committee Agenda 17 January 2001
- ◆ Council Agenda Item on Ashford's Future and minutes - October 2002
- ◆ Ashford's Future Study 'Overarching Report' December 2002
- ◆ Greater Ashford Development Framework Consultants Brief October 2003
- ◆ Panel Report RPG 9 Proposed Alterations for Ashford February 2004

Partnership documents

- ◆ Mapping of partnerships 2002
- ◆ Interim Delivery Plan – Ashford's Future Board May 2003
- ◆ Roger Tym and Partners Priority Areas In Kent for SEERA June 2003
- ◆ Ashford's Future Board – Role of the Delivery Board June 2003
- ◆ Progress Report on Ashford's Future 10th July 2003 (Including Interim Delivery Plan)
- ◆ BOZ Temple Morris proposal for branding project November 2004
- ◆ Ashford's Future Business Plan – Project programme December 2004
- ◆ Ashford's Future Board Report – Financial position of projects being supported by the ODPM 'Sustainable Communities Plan' February 2005
- ◆ The Ashford's Future Business Plan and delivery Mechanism – Board Papers 23 February 2005
- ◆ Paper on the Ashford's Voluntary Sector involvement in Ashford's Future
- ◆ Delivering Ashford's Infrastructure – Proposed Institutional Structure
- ◆ Green Charter – Recent Actions taken in the development of a Green Charter for Ashford

Greater Ashford Development Framework - reports

- ◆ Draft LDF Scheme October 2004
- ◆ Greater Ashford Development Framework Stage 3 Report – November 2004
- ◆ GADF Stage 4 Report - initial draft January 2005
- ◆ GADF/LDF Strategic Environmental Assessment – Report January 2005
- ◆ Greater Ashford Development Framework Kentish Express 17 February 2005
- ◆ Kent and Medway Structure Plan Panel Report – Ashford Section February 2005
- ◆ Relationship between the GADF and existing Local Plan

Planning service

- ◆ Strategic Planning Service Review – Overview and Scrutiny Committee 20 December 2004
- ◆ Strategic Planning Unit Performance and Planning Report 6 Month Report December 2004 – Ashford Borough Council
- ◆ Planning and Development Unit restructuring Report – March 2005

Development control and monitoring

- ◆ Leaflet on Design Coding – Ashford Barracks
- ◆ Paper on Best Places Group
- ◆ Supplementary Planning Guidance 6 – South Ashford Transport Study
- ◆ Note on Planning Delivery Grant
- ◆ DC customer experience study report 2004
- ◆ Section 106 and appeal monitoring October 2004
- ◆ Planning Delivery Grant Report 15 April 2004
- ◆ Draft Ashford Borough Council Major Sites Handling Charter February 2005
- ◆ Housing completion figures 1990 to 2005
- ◆ Housing Land Supply 1990 to 2004
- ◆ Social Housing completions since 1998
- ◆ Planning Best Value and Local Indicators

Community development

- ◆ ABC Communities Project Proposal OMAI November 2003
- ◆ Cultural Services achieving sustainable growth self-assessment 2005
- ◆ Mainstreaming social inclusion action plan 2005
- ◆ Cultural Services Review of income and sustainability criteria 2005
- ◆ Social Inclusion report

Publicity and consultation

- ◆ Examples of press coverage and Ashford Review
- ◆ Assessment of Enquiry by Design and Feed back report on Park Farm and Barracks March 2001
- ◆ Imagine a Future for Ashford and Ashford's Future leaflets
- ◆ Ashford's Future consultation leaflet – Development Options August 2002
- ◆ Ashford's Future Study – Summary of consultation/participation August 2001-December 2002
- ◆ Blue Sky Workshop July 2003
- ◆ Delegate list for the GADF workshops held in April and July 2004
- ◆ Ashford's Moving Forward workshop October 2003
- ◆ Turner and Townsend stakeholder management report November 2004
- ◆ Ashford Local Development Framework – Statement of Community Involvement December 2004
- ◆ ABC review extracts issues 46-53
- ◆ Stour centre redevelopment communications plan January 2005
- ◆ Root and Branch December 2004, February 2005
- ◆ Ashford's Future Communication Approach
- ◆ Ashford's Future Stakeholder Management Strategy and database

Reality checks undertaken

When we went on-site we visited a number of development sites in order to get a picture of how good the approach to growth is.

List of people interviewed

We interviewed a range of people involved with the growth of Ashford.

Richard Alderton	Head of Planning and Development
Simon Bandy	Joint Planning Policy Manager
Mark Carty	Head of Cultural Services
Cllr Paul Clokie	Leader of the Council
Cllr Rita Hawes	Chair of Scrutiny Committee (Other Issues)
David Herrick	Private Sector Housing Manager
David Hill	Chief Executive
Ian Hill	Head of Communications and Marketing
Lois Jarrett	Joint Development Control Manager – major sites
Cllr Kemp	Portfolio holder – growth and development
Ian Kirkland	Strategic Director – Community Services
Patricia Meakins	Research and Development Manager (Housing)
Paul Naylor	Strategic Director – Central and Housing Services
Focus group	Frontline staff
Focus group	Project Managers
Focus group	Heads of Service
Focus group	Opposition Group Leaders
Focus group	Other Councillors
External interviewees	
David Ashworth	English Partnerships
Martin Bacon	Managing Director – AF core team
Simon Bannister	Voluntary Sector Project Officer
Jonathon Bates	PCT Finance Director
Mike Bodkin	Kent County Council

Chris Capron	Chamber of Commerce
Lee Dance	Mid Kent Water Co
Simon Ellis	Churches together in Ashford
Dan Epstein	AF core team Sustainability and Innovation Champion
Judith Feline	Environment Agency
Gary Gordon	Discovery Centre Project Manager, KCC
Pete Errington	House Builders Federation
Andrew Jarrett	Director, Shepway District Council
Cllr Richard King	Kent County Councillor
Rev. Keith McNicholls	Willesborough Forum
Dr. Moorby	Kent Association of Parish Councils
Roy Morford	Chief Executive, Hastings Borough Council
Susan Priest	SEEDA
Mike Seager	ODPM
John Spence	Southern Water Co
Valerie Tupling	Local Plans Manager – Shepway District Council
Supt. Peter West	Area Police Commander
Paul Wookey	Locate in Kent

Improving public services

The Government has placed a duty upon local councils to deliver services to clear standards – of cost and quality – by the most economic, efficient and effective means available.⁴ Best value is a challenging framework that is designed to improve local services. Councils are required to assess their own performance and put in place measures to ensure continuous improvement in all of their services.

Councils must show that they have applied the 4Cs of best value:

- ◆ **challenging** why and how a service is being provided;
- ◆ **comparing** their performance with others' (including organisations in the private and voluntary sectors);
- ◆ embracing fair **competition** as a means of securing efficient and effective services; and
- ◆ **consulting** local **taxpayers**, customers and the wider business community.

The Government has decided that each council should be scrutinised by an independent inspectorate. The Audit Commission performs this role.

The purpose of the inspection, and of this report, is to:

- ◆ enable the public to see whether best value is being delivered;
- ◆ enable the Council to see how well it is doing;
- ◆ enable the Government to see how well its policies are working in practice;
- ◆ identify failing services where remedial action may be necessary; and
- ◆ identify and disseminate best practice.

⁴ This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission ('the Commission') following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.