

ELECTORAL REVIEW
ASHFORD BOROUGH

**Ashford Borough Council
Submission on Council Size**

April 2016

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Executive Summary

At present, 43 councillors representing 35 Wards serve on Ashford Borough Council. 27 Wards are single member wards; 8 are double member wards.

All councillors are elected every four years and serve a four year term of office. The most recent elections were held in May 2015.

The next scheduled Borough Council elections are due to take place in May 2019.

Based on the evidence set out in this submission, Ashford Borough Council propose that the number of elected councillors for the Borough will be 47.

Introduction

1. This document is submitted as evidence from Ashford Borough Council (ABC) to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) in relation to the size of the Council.
2. This submission has been prepared and collated by Officers using a range of data available, as outlined in the document, and in full consultation with elected members of the Borough Council through the Electoral Review Task Group. This final submission has been endorsed by full Council, and so reflects the views of the Borough Council, and the political parties represented on it.
3. The Electoral Review of Ashford commenced in January 2016 with the aim of reviewing electoral arrangements for the whole Borough. The review includes looking at the total number of members to be elected to the Council (Council size), the number and boundaries of electoral wards, the number of councillors for each ward, and the names of each ward.
4. The initial stage of an Electoral Review is to identify and confirm the preferred Council size. This is the number of elected councillors who will serve on the Borough Council. This should be the number required to deliver effective and convenient local government (ie: the number which allows the council and individual councillors to perform most effectively).
5. The final size of the Council will determine the average number of electors per councillor, and this is then used to determine warding patterns. It is therefore important that the figure agreed accurately reflects the needs of the authority and of the community. The LGBCE may amend the agreed figure if necessary to allow for a better representation of electors or as a result of consultation.

6. Within the review process, the LGBCE have no initial view on whether there should be an increase, decrease or no change in the size of Council. However, all submissions must be justified by evidence.
7. The last review of electoral arrangements in Ashford took place in 2000/2001 just as the Borough Council was preparing to move in 2001 from the “Committee System” of governance to the Leader and Cabinet model in accordance with the Local Government Act 2000. The outcomes of that review took effect from the local elections in May 2003. A report to the Council’s Policy and Resources Committee in July 2000 outlined some key points in the Council’s then proposed scheme:-
 - *It will involve a Council size of 43 members (compared with 49 at present). The reasons for this size are:-*
 - (i) *The Council is required by Central Government to modernise the democratic process by splitting the executive function from the ‘back bench’ role. Legislation provides that the executive unit should comprise no fewer than 3 members and no more than 10. This Council considers that on the projected electorate, the ‘back bench’ contingent will not need to be as large as it would be with the current number of councillors.*
 - (ii) *Regional Planning Guidance has identified Ashford as one of three future growth areas in the south east. A smaller Council size will make possible future expansion in line with the electorate more feasible.*
 - *It involves 33 wards. 23 with one member and 10 with two. The Review of Ward Membership Working Group favoured single member wards where possible as, in its view, they enhance councillors’ links with the public they represent.*
 - *There will be approximately 2009 electors to each councillor in the year 2005. This is the year the LGC required us to plan around. The projected electoral figures were calculated and have been justified in liaison with the Council’s Planning Policy section’.*
8. Thus it was clear that the predicted likely impact of cabinet style arrangements was taken into account when the current Council size was determined; and that future growth in size in line with electorate might need to follow in any later electoral review.
9. It is worth noting that in the financial year 2015/16, the total sum of allowances paid to Borough councillors was in the region of £340 K (including travel and subsistence). The sum paid to each councillor varies depending on responsibilities but the average is c. £7,885. Whilst the cost of allowances is not a matter taken into account in determining size, it is right to be aware of the likely cost implications of any increase in the number of councillors.

Guidance on Council Size

10. The LGBCE Guidance on Council Size submissions recommends the following issues should be considered:
 - (A) Governance and Decision-Making – how decisions are taken across the Authority and the volume and distribution of responsibility amongst elected members and staff.
 - (B) Scrutiny Functions – must be capable of being administered in a convenient and effective way.
 - (C) Representational Role of Councillors – workloads and responsibilities.
 - (D) The Future – known future trends and developments may affect the issue of size.

Each of these is now considered in turn.

PART ONE - GOVERNANCE AND DECISION-MAKING

11. Ashford Borough Council has had a Conservative administration since the local elections in 1999. The current composition of the 43 councillors is:

Conservative	35
Labour	3
Ashford Independent	3
Liberal Democrats	1
UK Independence Party	1

12. Whilst there is no formal role description for councillors at Ashford, the Constitution contains a brief explanation of expectations and responsibilities (see Article 2.03 (a)). A more detailed statement was produced by the Council for all councillors elected in May 2015. "What To Expect as an Ashford Borough councillor" (part of a suite of documents for new councillors called "A Framework") is attached as Appendix 1. This deals with attendance levels, training and development, community roles and standards of conduct.
13. The Council moved to the Leader and Cabinet model of governance in 2001. In 2010 the Council adopted the "new style" Leader and Cabinet model which took effect following the elections in May 2011. This provides for the Leader to be elected by Council for a 4 year term and the Leader is responsible for appointing a Deputy Leader and Cabinet.

Full Council

14. All councillors are members of Full Council which is responsible for approving the rate, the budget and adopting key policies within which Cabinet decisions are taken. The Council has six scheduled meetings a year. Additional special meetings are held as and when necessary. Meetings of Full Council are chaired by the Mayor (a civic mayor, not an executive mayor).

Composition and Work of Cabinet

15. The Cabinet currently consists of a Leader and nine Portfolio Holders. There is no individual Cabinet member decision-making. All Cabinet decisions are taken collectively at Cabinet meetings held monthly on a programmed basis.

Full details of the individual Portfolio titles and responsibilities are set out in Part 3, Appendix 2 of the Council's Constitution.

<http://www.ashford.gov.uk/part-3---responsibility-for-functions>

16. The Leader and Cabinet portfolio roles are not full time roles. However, in a recent email survey (February 2016), the Leader indicated he spent 40 + hours per week fulfilling his role as Leader of the Council (and Chairman of Cabinet). From the five other Cabinet members who responded the average hours on portfolio roles was 20 hours per week. Under recent Leaderships, the role of Portfolio Holders has been broadened to include the taking of the

lead role in presenting reports at Cabinet meetings and this has inevitably increased the workload and required expertise of each Portfolio Holder.

17. The Cabinet (formerly called Executive) was established in July 2001 with a Leader and five Portfolio Holders (PH). They met on a three weekly cycle until June 2006 when it changed to a four-weekly cycle.¹ Examples of numbers of meetings per year and numbers of decision items considered are as follows:-

Year	Meetings	Items	Average Items per Agenda
2003/4	15	163	10.85
2005/6	13	162	12.46
2010/11	11	118	10.72
2013/14	10	91	9.1
2015/16 ²	9	61	6.77

18. The Council has considerable experience of running Cabinets with different sizes and meeting schedules. It considers the current division of responsibilities facilitates effective leadership, although the precise nature and content of portfolios is kept under review by the Leader of the Council and invariably some changes are made at each electoral cycle.

Cabinet Approved Boards, Steering Groups and Task Groups

19. The following Cabinet Boards, Steering Groups and Task Groups were constituted by the Cabinet in June 2015 and revised Terms of Reference were agreed at the Cabinet meeting in September 2015:-

Trading and Enterprise Board
 Joint Transportation Board
 Ashford Strategic Delivery Board
 Town Centre Regeneration Board
 Conningbrook Lakes Country Park Steering Group
 Stour Centre Regeneration Steering Group
 Park Mall – Dynamics and Occupancy Steering Group
 Policy and Compliance Task Group
 Public Transport Liaison Task Group
 Council Tax and Welfare Reform Task Group
 Environment and Conservation Task Group
 Hothfield Regeneration Task Group

¹ The size of Cabinet has changed over the years.
 May 2008 – one additional Portfolio Holder making total membership 7.
 June 2010 – one additional Portfolio Holder making total membership 8
 April 2013 – two additional Portfolio Holders making total membership 10

² This was an election year so no meetings were held in April and May (or August)

20. The Cabinet Task Groups are chaired by the relevant Portfolio Holder and have a membership of four Councillors, including one Opposition Member. The Minutes of the meetings of the Trading and Enterprise Board, Joint Transportation Board, Ashford Strategic Delivery Board and Town Centre Regeneration Board are submitted to Cabinet meetings for information. If decisions are required arising from any of the discussions at the various Boards and Task Groups, these are subject to an Officer report to a Cabinet meeting for formal consideration and decision. The table below provides further details on these groups.

Meeting	Frequency/Actual Number of Meetings in 2015/16
Trading & Enterprise Board	2
Joint Transportation Board	Quarterly (4)
Ashford Strategic Delivery Board	Quarterly (4)
Town Centre Regeneration Board	Monthly (9)
Conningbrook Lakes Country Park Steering Group	Ad Hoc (3)
Stour Centre Regeneration Steering Group	Ad Hoc (3)
Park Mall Dynamics & Occupancy Steering Group	Monthly (9)
Policy & Compliance Task Group	Ad Hoc (2)
Public Transport Liaison Task Group	Biannual (2)
Council Tax & Welfare Reform Task Group	Bi-Monthly (5)
Environment & Conservation Task Group	Biannual (2)
Hothfield Regeneration Task Group	Ad Hoc (2)

Further details of the Terms of Reference of each of these groups can be found here -

<https://secure.ashford.gov.uk/committeesystem/ViewDocument.aspx?DocumentType=AgendaItem&AgendaId=19109&MeetingId=1887>

Delegations to Officers

21. The Council has a well-developed and comprehensive Scheme of Delegation to Officers (contained in Part 3 Appendix 5 of the Constitution) which sets out clearly where the responsibility and extent of delegation lies.
22. In line with Government requirements the majority of all planning applications are delegated. However, if an elected Member (alone or with the relevant Parish Council) feels that there are grounds for a particular application to be

determined by Committee, they can request this. Further details on Planning Committee business are given later (see paras. 25 et seq).

Regulatory and Other Committees - General

23. The Committees/Meetings shown in the Table below were constituted for the 2015/16 municipal year. The number of meetings during 2015 and attendance records for each are also included. All seats are allocated in accordance with Group strengths on the Council, save where Council has agreed to certain ex officio memberships eg Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny on Standards.

It is worth emphasising that since the last electoral review in Ashford, major licensing powers have been transferred from magistrates to local authorities. This includes the licensing of premises for the sale of alcohol which has brought significant additional work for officers and councillors in this important, high-profile regulatory function.

2015

Meeting	Number of ABC Members	Number of Meetings	Total Projected Attendance	Percentage of Actual Attendance
Council	43	6	258	86%
Cabinet	10	9	90	92%
Appeals Committee ^{1, 2}	15 (but 3 drawn per meeting)	2	6	100%
Appointments Committee	5	0		
Audit Committee	8	4	32	78%
Joint Transportation Board	7	4	28	89%
Licensing and Health & Safety Committee	13	1	13	69%
Licensing Sub-Committee ^{2, 3}	13 (but 3 drawn per meeting)	3	9	100%
Overview & Scrutiny Committee ¹	16 (2014/15) 12 (2015/16)	8	108	79%

Meeting	Number of ABC Members	Number of Meetings	Total Projected Attendance	Percentage of Actual Attendance
Planning Committee ³	17*	12	204	97%
Selection & Constitutional Review Committee	12	5	60	87%
Standards Committee	8	1	8	87.5%
Community Grants Panel	7	4	28	75%
Joint Consultative Committee	6	6	36	92%
Local Government & Polling Districts Task Group	10	5	50	76%
Local Plan & Planning Policy Task Group	10	9	90	88%
Member Training Panel	8	2	16	81%
Parish & Urban Forum	7	3	21	62%
Total	198	84	1057	86.75%

In addition the Leader of the Council is an ex officio member of the Planning Committee.

¹ These committees cannot include Cabinet members.

² These meet during the day which limits the availability of some councillors to sit.

³ Councillors cannot sit on these committees unless they have undergone specialist training.

24. Detailed Terms of Reference for the Council Committees is set out within Part 3 Appendix 4 of the Council's Constitution.

<http://www.ashford.gov.uk/part-3---responsibility-for-functions>

The membership of Committees etc is usually agreed at the Selection and Constitutional Review Committee meeting held annually in May. However, Group Leaders are free to change their representatives in accordance with their entitlement to seats on each respective Committee. Meetings of the Cabinet, Planning, Overview and Scrutiny, Joint Transportation Board, Audit, Parish and Urban Forum and Standards Committee are programmed and agreed as part of the meetings programme for the Municipal Year. There is one scheduled meeting of the Licensing, Health and Safety Committee held in January each year. Other meetings are held on an ad hoc basis dependent upon level of business. All meetings have been quorate and a breakdown of attendance per meeting is set out in the table above.

Planning Committee

25. Planning Committee meets on a four weekly cycle. Most planning decisions are delegated to officers. Committee deals with the most major, complex and controversial applications. The level of complexity involved in determining planning applications has increased significantly in recent years as a result of national and European guidance and regulation.
26. During the calendar year 2015, a total of 1282 planning decisions were made by the Council. Of these 1207 (94.15%) were dealt with by officers under delegated powers. The seventy-five most major, complex and sensitive were determined at meetings of the Planning Committee.
27. Planning Committee has a history of meetings occasionally extending very late into the evening. Accordingly a "guillotine" was introduced during the last administration which allowed meetings to be adjourned to another day at 10.30 pm in certain circumstances.¹

The average duration of Planning Committee meetings has remained reasonably constant as shown in the Table below.

Year	Average Duration	Numbers of Decisions Taken	% Delegated Approx.
2015	2 hrs 2 mins	75 out of 1282	94%
2013	2 hrs 19 mins	49 out of 1193	96%
2011	2 hrs 37 mins	88 out of 1191	93%
2009	1 hr 31 mins	102 out of 1262	92%
2007	2 hrs 10 mins	122 out of 1412	91%

¹ Since the introduction of this rule, no meeting has had to be "guillotined".

28. These figures demonstrate the depth of debate required to reach determinations. They also reflect a very keen level of public and parish council participation in Planning Committee meetings. For many residents planning decision-making is the most tangible and important role of a local councillor. Non Planning Committee councillors routinely attend meetings to speak on applications in their own wards and to represent the views of constituents.
29. Recent examples of major/complex planning decisions taken by Planning Committee are set out in the Table below.

Date	Application	Brief Description
October 2014	Chilmington Green	Mixed use development including 5,750 homes (the largest single planning application ever determined by ABC)
January 2014	Conningbrook	Creation of country park for recreational and water-sports purposes, an activity centre, a public house/restaurant, offices, car parks, including construction of 300 dwelling residential development and provision of an aggregates storage and distribution facility
September 2015	Ashford Designer Outlet	Extension of existing outlet to a site area of 18.1 ha.
December 2015	Elwick Place	Mixed use development including restaurants and cafes, a hotel, a cinema and car parking.
April 2015	Ashford College	Demolition of existing and construction of new College buildings
August 2013 - January 2016	Cheesemans Green	Various applications totalling approx. 1200 dwellings and associated facilities and works.
December 2010 – August 2014	Bridgefield (Park Farm)	Various applications totalling 454 dwellings and associated works

30. Planning Committee has more voting members (17 + 1 ex officio) than any other. This reflects its importance to local communities and the Council's wish to ensure as broad a representation as possible. The Council considers its approach to planning decision-making works well and is effective, transparent and democratic.

Conclusions on Council Committee Memberships

31. Taking into account the number of places on Committees, Task Groups, Boards, Panels etc. the number of possible attendances each year is well in excess of 1,100. The addition of the busy Overview and Scrutiny meetings schedule further increases the number of attendances.
32. Although not all councillors are eligible to sit on all Committees or Panels, an approximate rounded average number of meetings per councillor per year is in the region of 26 (leading to a total of 1118 attendances). This does not include additional ad hoc meetings of Committees, boards etc nor attendances required at partnership meetings or the considerable number of external bodies to which the Borough Council appoints representatives (as to which see paras 34 – 36 below). Nor does it include the significant number of attendances at meetings by non-committee members. This applies particularly at meetings of Cabinet and Planning Committee. Thus a considerable councillor resource is required simply to service the democratic decision-making mechanisms in place. Any material reduction of that resource would be likely to require change in the existing democratic structure. On the other hand, a modest increase in the councillor resource would assist in spreading this element of the member workload and facilitating more effective decision-making.
33. In terms of the "spread" of Committee membership (including Groups, Forums and Cabinet Task Groups) the position is as set out in the table below. The average number is 4.90 per councillor. According to the LGA "Census of Local Authority Councillors" (2013) the average is 3.3, although this may not be an exact comparison. However, the Committee workload per councillor at Ashford does appear to be higher than the national average.

Number of Committee Memberships¹	How Many Councillors
0	1
1	3
2	3
3	4
4	9
5	6
6	8
7	2
8	2
9	4
10	1
Total	43 councillors
Average	4.90 memberships

Outside Bodies

34. Ashford Borough Council appoints a councillor or councillors to a wide range of outside bodies and organisations. Such appointments may be annual or for a term of office. These are set out in the table below. In total there are 46 such bodies. Councillors are expected to attend meetings of the outside body and provide an annual report on activity of the body to the Selection and Constitutional Review Committee. The frequency with which these bodies meet and the time commitment required varies.

The link below provides further details on the bodies to which the Council appoints councillors.

<http://www.ashford.gov.uk/part-6---members-allowances-scheme>

35. Over recent years, the number of bodies to which appointments have been made has been rationalised and a further review is to be undertaken to ensure all appointments remain worthwhile and relevant. However, it is considered that the number of appointments will continue to make a significant call on member time.

Partnerships

¹ This includes Groups, Forums & Cabinet Task Groups but excludes Full Council.

36. Councillors also act on various strategic decision-making partnership bodies as set out in the table below.

Partnership	What it Deals With	Councillor and Frequency of Meetings
Ashford Health and Wellbeing Board	Looks at improving the health and wellbeing of the people living in Ashford through joined up commissioning across the National Health Service, social care, borough council, public health and other services that are directly related to health and wellbeing.	1 Member – Quarterly Meetings
Ashford Community Safety Partnership	Working with representatives from the police, the local council, the fire, health and probation services amongst many others to develop and implement strategies to protect local communities from crime and to help people feel safe. They work out local approaches to deal with issues including antisocial behaviour, drug or alcohol misuse and re-offending.	1 Member – Quarterly Meetings
Ashford Leisure Trust	To ensure the smooth operation of Ashford's principal leisure asset(s).	1 Member – Varies but have been meeting monthly
East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust	The Council of Governors for the Hospitals Trust incorporating East Kent's five hospitals. (rep on behalf of the 6 EK Local Authorities)	1 Member – Quarterly Meetings

PART TWO - SCRUTINY FUNCTIONS

37. Ashford Borough Council currently has one Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) comprised of 12 members¹. Seats are allocated in accordance with political balance rules. This results in 10 Conservative and 2 opposition members. Historically at Ashford, Chairmanship and Vice Chairmanship have been taken by members of opposition groups.
38. OSC meets monthly and has its regular work programme which it determines itself. A “tracker” is maintained of matters which OSC has expressed a wish to review as time permits. OSC has the ability to “call in” Cabinet decisions, although at Ashford this is rarely exercised. One reason for this is that the Leader of the Council chairs Cabinet in a way which encourages involvement by non-Cabinet councillors in decision-making at Cabinet. Chairmen of Cabinet Task Groups do likewise.
39. At their meeting on 20 October 2015, the Chief Executive recommended the Committee consider adopting a more strategic approach to scrutiny. He indicated that there was an opportunity for the Committee to become involved in a more strategic, constructive and a more interesting programme of work which could add considerable value to the Authority. The Committee were supportive of adopting a more strategic approach and at its November meeting a dedicated session was held to devise a new forward work programme based on some of the principles outlined at the October meeting. Over time, it is certainly possible that development of a more strategic role for OSC will lead to pressures on the work programme and the need to consider increasing the membership of OSC.
40. In terms of overall workload, the work programme of the Committee has proved manageable although there is a particularly heavy period between December and January when the dedicated Budget Scrutiny Task Group has a series of meetings to scrutinise the draft Budget produced by the Cabinet. The Scrutiny Committee is supported by an Officer (currently within Member Services) who provides assistance to the Chairman and Vice-Chairman and who also undertakes research and drafting of reports and information for presentation to the Committee. Other Officers within the Council also regularly produce reports for consideration at the Committee. Whilst there is no routine requirement for members of the Committee to undertake work in between meetings, on occasions this does occur. For example, recently the Chairman and Vice-Chairman attended two separate briefing meetings with representatives of Southern Water and South East Water in terms of a fact finding mission based on the full Committee’s wish that issues associated with the work of those companies be examined.

¹ Since 2001, the number of members involved directly in OSC has varied. Between 2001 and 2004 there were three OSCs (aligned to three Cabinet Policy Advisory Groups) with 15 members each. This reduced to two Committees in 2004 and then one in 2003, originally with 19 members.

41. It is fair to say that generally the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has been valued by the Cabinet and indeed the vast majority of recommendations made to the Cabinet have been accepted. Cabinet Portfolio Holders are also invited to meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee when matters within their Portfolio are on the agenda.

PART THREE - REPRESENTATIONAL ROLE OF COUNCILLORS

42. The extent to which councillors routinely engage with and represent the views of local communities has a fundamental impact on their workloads and responsibilities.
43. During February 2016 a survey of all councillors was undertaken to help gauge workloads and range of community activity. A total of 31 of 43 members responded to the survey (72%). In early March this was followed up with a further single question survey seeking an overall figure from each councillor for the total hours spent on Council business on average each week¹. Twenty councillors responded to this (c.47%), including two of the ten Cabinet members. The March survey revealed a total of 474 hours, with an average of 23.7 hours per councillor.

However, six Cabinet councillors had already responded to a separate email survey (also in February, see para. 16 above) regarding hours spent each week fulfilling Cabinet responsibilities only. The average number of hours was 20. If one assumes either a 50% uplift or 100% uplift to allow for non-Cabinet work (eg on other committees, casework, community engagement, group work) then the average for Cabinet members rises to either 30 hours per week or 40 hours per week. Adding these to the March survey data (for the eight Cabinet members who did not respond to the March survey) provides a total of 714 hours or 794 hours amongst 28 councillors, an average of 25.5 hours per week per councillor or 28.35 hours per week per councillor.

44. Thus the estimated average number of hours spent by councillors on Council business each week is likely to be between 25.5 and 28.35 hours. In the LGA Census (2013), councillors reported spending an average of 25.1 hours per week on Council and group/party business with the majority being spent on Council business (20.8 hours). Current information therefore indicates that the Ashford average number of hours per week exceeds the national average.
45. Some key data from the detailed February 2016 survey is set out in the Table below.

¹ Councillors were asked to include time spent on:

- Attending meetings at Civic Centre (member or officer)
- Reading and preparing for these meetings
- Constituency casework
- Group or party work
- Work with external bodies
- Other community work including surgeries, newsletters, social media, working with parish councils etc

Representational Topic	Survey Statistic
Sitting on Committees	35% spend 1 – 2 hours a week 26% spend 3 – 5 hours a week 23% spend 5 – 10 hours a week
Reading/Preparing for Committees	35% spend 2 – 5 hours 29% spend 5 – 10 hours 19% spend 1 – 2 hours
Casework Subject	Most common topics planning and housing
Casework Volumes	37% 2 – 5 hours 27% 5 – 10 hours 13% 1 – 2 hours 20% 10 – 20 hours
Parish Council or Urban Forum Liaison	67% regular attendance 27% occasional attendance
Methods of Engagement with Constituents and Committees (other than email and telephone)	73% Newsletter 20% Surgery 10% Blog 50% Social media 30% Public meetings

46. It is clear that in addition to their Committee-based work, councillors spend a significant number of hours each week engaging with communities through casework and liaison with other tiers of local government. This work contributes significantly to the smooth running and effective governance of the Council.

In response to a specific survey question a clear majority of councillors (between 67% and 83%) considered the time they spent on attending meetings, working with constituents and working with community organisations was “about right”.¹

47. Councillors were asked an “open” question as to how they considered the representative role of the ward councillor has changed over the last 10 years. Themes emerging included raised expectations of full accessibility, especially by electronic means², community leadership roles and a general raised

¹ But few councillors would be likely to state that they thought they spent too much time engaging with their communities! Empirical data is a more reliable barometer perhaps. An important aspect of community engagement for councillors is the Ward Member Grant Scheme. Each councillor has a budget of £3,000 each year to support community activities and initiatives in their wards. This enhances the councillor’s role as a community representative and leader.

² 41 of the current 43 borough councillors have email addresses and are able to access corporate systems remotely.

expectation of councillors being able to engage themselves (and not simply through officers) with professional and technical issues.

48. Without question, expectations in these areas will continue to rise and the workloads and pressures on individual councillors will, as a result, continue to rise. In this context it is worth noting that a significant percentage of Ashford's councillors (21 of 43) are in employment or full-time education. This affects the time they realistically have available for dealing with casework and other Council business. Both these factors tend to point in the direction of more, rather than less, councillors for the future. Too small a council size could well deter people of working age from becoming councillors due to time commitments, especially at key Cabinet or other 'special responsibility' levels.

PART FOUR - THE FUTURE

New Corporate Plan

49. In December 2015 the council agreed a new Corporate Plan - "*The Five Year Corporate Plan – for Aspiration, Action and Achievement*", setting out what the council aims to achieve over the next five years.

<http://www.ashford.gov.uk/the-five-year-corporate-plan-for-aspiration-action-and-achievement-2015-2020>

50. Work has begun to produce comprehensive 'Delivery Planning' to translate the corporate plan into action. Whilst this is in the early stages the role of local members to shape, challenge and provide responsibility for these ambitions remains central to the longer-term success of the council's ambitions. The new corporate plan is also underpinned by a set of principles that strive for the council to be well resourced, with effective governance, delivering high quality services with good communication in a safe environment – all of which should demonstrate good compliance and standards.

Devolution and the changing policy landscape

51. Following the General Election of May 2015, it has become clear that devolution forms a key pillar of the new government's legislative and policy agenda. Devolution will exert a significant impact on the scope, complexity and diversity of the council's business – with likely implications for the workload and responsibility of councillors.
52. Early discussions have already begun between the council, its district neighbours and the County Council to discuss how authorities can most effectively respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by the devolution agenda. Whilst the full range of governance options is still to be explored, it is clear that any successful devolution will be based upon core principles of transforming local services, delivering increased efficiency and offering further value for money. As such, relevant and reflective governance arrangements, of which Members are a key component, will form a key element of any devolved structures.
53. The council has already developed strong relationships with many community-based organisations to take on local assets, provide services on the council's behalf or run services which benefit the communities they serve. This ethos will continue with large-scale initiatives such as a new Community Management Organisation at the major new settlement at Chilmington Green which further shifts the emphasis down to local communities.

Service Delivery

54. Over the last few years, the council has successfully adopted a more entrepreneurial approach to service delivery. This approach has been underpinned by a commitment to actively engage with partners across sectors

and interests, and conscious investment in key infrastructure and land in order to unlock those initiatives which are crucial to the borough's long-term growth and prosperity.

55. Councillors form a key pillar of this approach, with active member involvement in the council's new governance arrangements for a Trading Company, Strategic Delivery Board, Town Centre Regeneration Board and others. Ashford Borough Council is a solution-based organisation, an ethos which demands responsive and reflective governance, risk-management and accountability. It is important that these governance arrangements (and the capacity and skills of members to fulfil their role within them) are robust, efficient and meet the needs of the council and the community. Effective scrutiny of these evolving delivery models may also necessitate additional skills and capacity within the current committee structure.
56. Hybrid service delivery methods and the opportunities presented by in-house service provision are currently being explored and implemented in areas such as grounds maintenance. This acknowledgement of the need for a multi-faceted approach to achieving financial self-sufficiency, income generation and service improvements began in 2014 when the Cabinet approved the "Informing the Next Five Years" report.¹
57. This report stressed the need to look beyond service reduction, and included a new *Counter-Inflation Strategy*, and a *Borrowing and Investment Strategy* intended to develop and maintain a set of prudent and sensible principles to enable the council to take advantage of financial and other external markets for the benefit of the borough of Ashford. A continuous drive to explore further innovative and effective services – in concert with the wider devolution agenda noted above – is likely to require very different ways of working.
58. The diversity, dynamism and entrepreneurship of this future service delivery will need to be complemented by an engaged, active and knowledgeable group of councillors, able to pivot between a wide variety of issues which may include engaging with new partnerships or different governance models.
59. As such, over and above the workload generated by the traditional ward responsibilities noted in the Section above, future service delivery which embraces hybrid, partnership and in-house provision will require further development in the skills and roles of councillors.

Finance

60. Ashford Borough Council's service and financial planning process is underpinned by a robust evidence base that is used to inform decision making. The recent past has seen a growing emphasis on prioritisation, efficiency, collaboration and most especially innovation, income generation and self-sufficiency.

¹ Cabinet, 10th July 2014, Agenda Item Number 6

61. As part of the development of the council's Medium Term Financial Plan and Annual Budget, analysis is undertaken of the key financial assumptions on which the budget will be based. The key areas covered include:
- Economic factors, such as inflation
 - Treasury Management, including interest rates
 - Demographic pressures on spending
 - Asset Management, including a review of the Council's portfolio
 - Other spending pressures opportunities (revenue and capital).
62. The council's financial forecasting process is dynamic and reflects changing/emerging priorities, demand for services and changes in external factors. As noted above, the council has embraced entrepreneurship, strategic investment and an overarching ambition to be 'Grant Free' by 2018-19 as mechanisms to achieve greater self-sufficiency for the council and the borough in future years. This has and will continue to have an inevitable impact on service delivery, response times and councillors' own constituency work – and the need for councillors to be effective community leaders and advocates for the council has, as a consequence, increased.

The Electorate

63. The current electorate in Ashford Borough (2016) is 89,862. The estimated total population is 125,000 (ONS Mid-Year Projections). The electorate is the key number for the purposes of this review.

The electorate figure for 2016 is lower than the figures for 2012 and 2013 (90,919 and 91,565 respectively), all as taken from the relevant published electoral registers. This anomaly arises due to the effect of the transition to the new Individual Electoral Registration (IER) system which began in 2014. As a result of new IER procedures, the pace of removals from the register has outstripped the pace of additions but this is not expected to be a long-term trend. Accordingly the figure for 2016 (and those for 2014 and 2015) is artificially low at a time of continuing population growth and the strong expectation is that the register will return to normal levels and trends well before the projection date of 2022.

64. Consistent with Ashford's past growth and status for many years, its population has grown steadily.

Year	Population	Electorate
2016	125,000	89,862
2011	117,956	89,313
2001	102,661	76,994

65. Electoral forecast data for Ashford shows that further significant population and electorate growth to 2022 is inevitable.

Year	Population	Electorate
2022	133,000	99,868

This represents an increase of approximately 6.5% on the current population. When the last electoral review was undertaken in Ashford, the point was made by the Council at that time that there would be scope for increasing Council size at the next review should population and electorate continue to grow (see paragraph 7).

66. Comparison with Ashford's "family group" of similar authorities reveals the following¹

Council	Review Electorate		Current Electorate	Councillors	Electors per Councillor Approx.
	Year	Forecast			
Maidstone			112,112	55	2,036
Tonbridge & Malling	2018	97,539		54	1,806
Stroud	2020	97,781		51	1,917
W. Oxfordshire		80,000		49	1,632
Braintree	2019	116,844		49	2,384
Tunbridge Wells			78,595	48	1,635
Test Valley			93,571	48	1,950
Mendip			81,745	47	1,739
Lichfield	2019	88,783		47	1,889

¹ This is the so-called "Nearest Neighbours" model prepared and published by CIPFA. The comparison is based in some cases on forecasted electorates and in some cases on current electorates, depending on whether electoral reviews have recently been undertaken.

Council	Review Electorate		Current Electorate	Councillors	Electors per Councillor Approx.
	Year	Forecast			
Wychavon			95,169	45	2,115
East Hants			88,294	37	2,386
Rugby	2016	80,026		42	1,904
Vale of White Horse	2018	98,802		38	2,600
Daventry	2016	65,380		36	1,816
ASHFORD			89,862¹	43	2,090
ASHFORD	2022	99,868		43	2,323
ASHFORD	2022	99,868		47	2,125

Notes

- Approximate average electorate (excluding Ashford) - 91,070
- Average number of councillors (excluding Ashford) - 46
- Approximate average number of electors per councillor (excluding Ashford) - 1,987

67. From this it can be seen that even Ashford's current artificially low electorate is only just below the average. Its forecast electorate at 2022 places it at 3rd highest in the "family group"

At the same time its number of councillors is currently below the average and its number of electors per councillor (2090) is above the average even using the artificially low current electorate figures. Using forecast electorate figures of 99,868 Ashford's number of electors per councillor rises to c.2323, making it fourth highest in the group.

68. "Family group" comparisons indicate that any reduction in the number of councillors would move it further away from the relevant averages referred to in the Table in para. 66 above, whilst a modest increase in the number of councillors would move it closer to the average. For example an increase in the number of councillors by 4 to, say, 47 would bring Ashford up to the

¹ See paragraph 63 for an explanation as to why this electorate figure is artificially low.

average number of councillors with the number of electors per councillor in the region of 2125, maintaining it close to its current ratio.

Conclusions on Part Four – The Future

69. The council will continue to be a partner and stakeholder with a number of organisations from both the public and private sectors, which will require officer and elected member representation. Councillors will be required to represent the council and have greater knowledge in a number of areas to negotiate and ensure the interests of the council and the community are met. The devolution agenda will only sharpen the need to explore the full spectrum of possibilities under collaborative management and governance arrangements.
70. Ashford Borough Council is very active already in including councillors in its extended management arrangements that have become a necessary constituent part of modern management. More complex (and more demanding) management will become necessary with increasing numbers of councillors involved, especially those with significant committee or executive responsibility.
71. Ashford Borough Council remains a hugely ambitious council in a time of reducing resources. In recent years the council has found alternative means of funding and delivering not only its services but also an impressive number of high-impact strategic initiatives. While the council will continue to aim for focussed, efficient and value for money services, this is matched by an ever-greater role for elected members across the Council in ensuring that the authority's emphasis on dynamic delivery is matched by an effective decision making and scrutiny process.
72. Whilst it is too early in the life of the devolution agenda to reach firm conclusions on the impact on council size, the council foresees that the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of all of its councillors will evolve to become more intense and complex over the coming years. With a continuing emphasis on efficient services - delivered through a full mix of hybrid, contracted or in-house provision, alongside devolution, collaboration and new ways of working, the council considers that any reduction in the number of councillors would lead to capacity and governance risks; whilst a modest increase could be seen as a prudent response to the future challenges described in this section.
73. A modest increase in the number of councillors would also address the risk of Ashford drifting further from the important "Family Group" averages referred to in the Table at paragraph 66.

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS ON COUNCIL SIZE

- A. Given that the current structure of the Council, including the range of task groups, panels and Boards and the current framework of regulatory Committees (including Planning) works well, it is undesirable and unnecessary to make structural changes simply in order to accommodate a reduction in the number of councillors. The current structure has evolved over many years and where change has been required, change has been embraced and this would continue to be the Council's approach to good governance and effective decision-making.
- B. The reduction from 49 borough councillors to 43 in 2003, following the previous electoral review, was predicated on the assumption of a significantly diminished decision-making role and workload for "backbench" or non-executive councillors. Whilst it is true that cabinet government has concentrated executive power in fewer councillors, the long-standing culture and practice of inclusive decision-making at Ashford means that in reality there has been no significant reduction in councillor meetings or attendances. A wide range of consultative member task and steering groups, boards etc. has continued to support formal decision-making processes at Ashford.
- C. In addition to this, the Council's long-term development and growth role has resulted in most councillors continuing to demand and to have high levels of involvement in forward-planning and place-making decisions (including through task groups and the like) whether or not they are voting members of decision-making committees. Thus the role of non-executive (and non-planning committee) members at Ashford has continued to be significant and demanding for this reason as well. Accordingly a key assumption underlying the reduction of councillors at Ashford in 2003 has not materialised in practice.
- D. The two Ashford committees with the heaviest workloads are Cabinet and Planning Committee. In terms of councillor resources both operate in 2016 with significantly higher memberships than at the time of the previous review. In 2001 the respective membership were 6 and 14. In 2016 they are 10 and 17. These increases reflect the growing complexity of and public engagement with the Council's business and it is likely membership will remain at these levels for the foreseeable future. A small increase in councillor numbers at Ashford would target the workload pressures these key membership increases reflect.
- E. Conversely, any reduction in Council size would be likely to increase the direct workload of councillors in terms of numbers of meetings. Even remaining at the current size of 43 against the background described above, time available for the increasingly important and demanding role of engaging with constituents and other local community organisations will be more limited. The impact of this would be accentuated by the fact that about half of councillors are likely to be in employment or education and that the Council's electorate continues to increase significantly. Indeed the effect on workloads could discourage people in full-time employment from considering a role as an elected councillor, reducing the diversity of representation and limiting the skills and experience of members.

F. A number of other factors indicate that a small increase in the number of councillors would be consistent with effective decision-making and effective government. These include:-

- (i) As is clear from Section Four of this submission, Ashford's corporate strategy embraces an entrepreneurial approach untypical of shire districts and an emphasis on efficient services delivered through various types of provider. Furthermore, recent and proposed developments are creating large new communities on a scale of regional importance. Such strategies bring vital pressures and increasing complexity to the role of the councillor.

The "Framework" document produced by the Council for new members in 2015 (see Part One of this submission and Appendix 1) clarifies and raises considerably the general level of expectation and standards for Ashford councillors.

Recognising the need to ensure a diversity of representation amongst councillors, workloads must be reasonable and not discourage those in employment, education or those already active in the community.¹

- (ii) Comparisons with Ashford's "family group" of authorities show that Ashford already has a higher than average elector-councillor ratio and a lower than average number of councillors. This situation worsens markedly using electoral forecast data to 2022. An increase from 43 to 47 councillors would offset the impact of the growing electorate and provide necessary additional resilience and capacity to ensure decision-making remains effective and community leadership and representation remain strong.
- (iii) The number of committee memberships per councillor at Ashford is higher than the national average.
- (iv) The average hours per week spent on council business by Ashford councillors is higher than the national average of 25.1 hours.
- (v) Growing expectations of accessibility, community leadership roles and technical competence will make the representative role of councillors more challenging. It is worth emphasising that internet access, use of social media and electronic communication were rare or non-existent at Ashford at the time of the last review. Whilst these changes have had some obvious benefits, they have also increased markedly both member workload pressures and public expectations.

¹ Currently in Ashford, 7 councillors are "dual hatted" (6 as parish councillors and one as a county councillor) whilst one councillor is triple hatted. In addition a number of councillors have other roles in the community independently of their council membership eg school governors, charity trustees etc.

Ashford Borough Council therefore recommends that the number of borough councillors increases to 47 with effect from the local elections in May 2019.