

Swale Borough Council: Delivering a better borough for you

Corporate Plan 2019-2022

Version 3.0

Version control

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Foreword

[To be included in final version]

Introduction

The corporate plan is the overarching statement of the council's strategic priorities for the period April 2019 to March 2022. It consists of 16 medium-term objectives grouped into three broad priorities. Between them, the objectives articulate both local political aspirations for the borough and community of Swale and the council's response to anticipated changes to the policy and fiscal context in which it operates.

The document's primary purpose is to ensure that the organisation's resources are coherently allocated in support of agreed priorities. The objectives established here will therefore be a significant factor in determining the focus of the council's activities over the next few years, but the plan sets out a broad direction of travel rather than a detailed list of actions, and its emphasis is on areas of change and development rather than continuity.

Swale is one of 12 districts (boroughs and cities) which make up the county of Kent. Located on the county's northern coast, the borough sits between Medway, Maidstone and Canterbury, around 40 miles from central London in one direction and 25 miles from the Channel tunnel in the other. The borough covers an area of 140 square miles, roughly one-tenth of Kent, and is home to just under 150,000 people, also approximately one-tenth of the county figure.

For such a relatively small area, the borough is a remarkably diverse place, including the historic market town of Faversham, the traditional seaside resort of Sheerness and the industrial town of Sittingbourne, which is currently undergoing a major council-led regeneration. The borough also includes extensive and important rural areas, accounting for around a quarter of the population, which take in the whole of the Isle of Sheppey and part of the Kent Downs area of outstanding natural beauty.

Swale's demographic make-up is no less diverse than its geography, including a mix of affluent and less affluent areas, but in general the borough is less well-off than is typical for the south-east. Over recent decades, Swale has seen a successful diversification of its economy, which now has key strengths in manufacturing and distribution, as well as high-skilled activities including cutting-edge technology and life sciences. Nonetheless, there are some concentrated pockets of severe socioeconomic deprivation to be found in locations across the area.

The borough council is made up of 47 elected members representing 24 wards and employing around 280 full-time equivalent staff. Thanks to prudent decision-making, robust management practices and considerable success in expanding the business rate base, Swale has been better placed than many councils to weather the storm of austerity over the last decade.

Nonetheless, financial sustainability will remain a key concern for the organisation over the next few years, and financial constraints will represent a significant brake on what the council is able to achieve. The first two priorities in this plan set out the objectives for the borough towards which we want to work notwithstanding these constraints, but we must recognise that the constraints are real and will have an impact. The final priority sets out some of the ways we will try to obviate or minimise this impact.

CONSULTATION DRAFT

Summary:

Our priorities and medium-term objectives for 2019-2022

Priority 1: Delivering regeneration

- 1.1 Continue to support Swale's economy to provide a diverse and increasing range of employment opportunities across the full spectrum of skill and wage levels.
- 1.2 Support residents and businesses to improve the borough's vocational skills.
- 1.3 Implement the visitor economy framework to increase investment, address new visitor demands and grow the value of the sector to the Swale economy.
- 1.4 Progress the redevelopment of Sittingbourne town centre and extend regeneration into other parts of the borough.
- 1.5 Develop a coherent and flexible long-term plan to help Sheppey fulfil its potential for the benefit of all its residents.
- 1.6 Take steps to help the most disadvantaged families and communities to embrace opportunities from regeneration, skills provision and economic growth.

Priority 2: Delivering improved quality of life

- 2.1 Keep the borough clean and well-maintained, and continue to provide excellent environmental stewardship.
- 2.2 Maximise opportunities from sustainable development to improve infrastructure and create attractive and functional new neighbourhoods.
- 2.3 Work with partners to develop measures to address air quality issues throughout the borough.
- 2.4 Develop a pragmatic and adaptable approach to helping local families to access affordable decent housing.
- 2.5 Promote improved health, wellbeing and enjoyment of life by facilitating and supporting a wide range of sporting, cultural and other leisure activities.

Priority 3: Delivering the council of tomorrow

- 3.1 Continue to reduce dependence on government-controlled funding sources and support innovative ways to ensure other objectives can be met in the context of diminished resources.
- 3.2 Experiment with a more differentiated approach to service delivery for key neighbourhoods and key groups of customers.
- 3.3 Encourage innovative ideas at every level of the organisation and embed the Swale Manager programme to ensure consistent understanding of the council's expectations of all managers.
- 3.4 Develop new approaches to partnership working based on shared objectives with statutory agencies, other councils, and the private and voluntary sectors.
- 3.5 Continue to ensure that Swale's internal governance and decision-making are second to none.

Priority 1: Delivering regeneration

Objective 1.1:

Continue to support Swale's economy to provide a diverse and increasing range of employment opportunities across the full spectrum of skill and wage levels.

The council has unusually good links with local businesses, is well-placed to understand their needs, and offers a comprehensive range of support and guidance services to entrepreneurs and investors. An additional 280,000m² of commercial business space was constructed in Swale over the past decade, more than any other Kent district. Swale's economic growth has produced 6,000 additional jobs since 2013, while during the same period new business start-ups increased by 56 percent and Swale continued to have the best survival rates for new businesses in Kent.

Nonetheless, unemployment in the borough remains above the regional average, and despite significant successes in attracting and growing high-tech businesses, especially in the life sciences sector, much of the employment available in the borough is relatively low-skilled and low-paid, with much larger manufacturing and logistics sectors than is typical for the south-east. In addition to promoting general economic growth, the council will therefore also focus on facilitating employment opportunities right across the spectrum of skill and wage levels.

Having benefited from so much expansion already, the challenge of where future business growth can be accommodated, which is common right across North Kent, will also need to be addressed in creative and sensitive ways, including options for bringing much-needed employment opportunities to areas of the borough which are more remote and hence less attractive to most businesses.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

All six objectives in this priority are closely interconnected. The need for new employment sites accessible both from existing towns and villages and potentially from new settlements also links this objective to place-shaping (Objective 2.2), while the vital importance of business rates for funding council services, as well as the reduction in demand on services that can result from more prosperous residents, give this objective clear links with council finances (Objective 3.1).

Objective 1.2:

Support residents and businesses to improve the borough's vocational skills.

Swale has a relatively low proportion of highly qualified people and a high proportion of people with no qualifications compared to national and regional averages. Although there is a limited provision on Sheppey, Sittingbourne is the only town of its size in Kent not to have its own dedicated further education college, with Swale's post-16 vocational students being obliged to travel some two hours in each direction to Medway, Canterbury or Maidstone to access a full range of learning opportunities. The council will work with partners in the skills sector to pursue with vigour all reasonable options to address this deficiency through the provision of a new further education college in Sittingbourne, and will explore possibilities for Kent-based universities to play a greater role in the educational life of all parts of the borough.

In addition to enabling successful transition into good careers for school-leavers, skills provision in Swale also needs to benefit working-age people, particularly those whose multiple issues and lack of basic employment skills inhibit their ability to take advantage of new opportunities. There is also a need to support businesses to enable their employees to upskill so that they can make progress in their careers and open up entry-level vacancies to new recruits, and to help people who want to re-train mid-career in order to change direction or re-enter the workplace after spending time away.

These needs are likely to become more pressing as further globalisation, automation and general business investment in productivity increase the skill levels required in many sectors and erode the availability dependable lower-skilled employment still further. New further education provision will help meet these needs, but the council will also encourage employers to invest in skills within their workforce and will lead by example through its own programme, including the use of apprenticeship frameworks to upskill staff.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

All six objectives in this priority are closely interconnected. The council's ability to contribute to the overall skill levels in the borough by means of training opportunities for staff must not be overlooked, linking this objective to council innovation (Objective 3.3), while the need for productive partnerships with businesses and skills providers link it clearly with improved collaboration (Objective 3.4).

Objective 1.3:

Implement the visitor economy framework to increase investment, address new visitor demands and grow the value of the sector to the Swale economy.

Swale benefits from a diverse range of visitor attractions catering to an equally diverse range of visitors, including historic towns with a rich nautical heritage, traditional seaside resorts, great beaches, and a wide variety of internationally protected landscapes and wildlife reserves. Tourism is already the borough's fourth-largest economic sector, contributing almost £200m per year to the local economy and supporting more than 4,500 jobs, but we recognise that there is potential to grow this still further.

The council has worked with partners including local tourism businesses to develop a visitor economy framework aimed at ensuring we make the most of local resources and assets. Outcomes include better marketing of what the borough has to offer, improved connectivity and more attractive public spaces, better economic intelligence and support to businesses, and the development of a new cultural offer based on the unique heritage and distinctiveness of each of the borough's geographical areas. The council will continue to work with partners to implement the framework over the life of the corporate plan, aiming to add £25m to the value of the sector to the borough's economy by 2023. In doing so, the council will be conscious of the need to ensure that improvements create a more attractive environment for both businesses as well as visitors.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

All six objectives in this priority are closely interconnected. The need to ensure that the borough looks its best for visitors and residents alike links this objective with the environment (Objective 2.1), while the need to support and promote a wide range of visitor attractions link it no less clearly to leisure (Objective 2.5). The need for good joint working with a range of partners from small businesses to national agencies also link this objective with improved collaboration (Objective 3.4).

Objective 1.4:

Progress the redevelopment of Sittingbourne town centre and extend regeneration into other parts of the borough.

The completion of Sittingbourne's new cinema, hotel and restaurants, together with the new multi-storey car-park and new retail sites, will represent the culmination of a long-standing ambition for the council, and has also resulted in considerable organisational learning in terms of how such schemes can be made viable and the joint venture arrangements which can be used to achieve them. The next phase of the town centre redevelopment will need to include consideration of the most advantageous futures for both the Swale House and Swallows sites, and if appropriate for moving the council offices and the leisure centre to alternative locations.

The regeneration of run-down physical infrastructure can act as a catalyst for wholesale economic and social renewal, and where this is likely to be the case the council will look to replicate the success of Sittingbourne town centre, on an appropriate scale and in different configurations of partnerships, in other locations. In considering these, we will be mindful of the need to ensure that the economic opportunities created by any scheme can in fact be taken up by the local families who would most benefit from them.

The council understands that the renewal of physical infrastructure is important also in areas where sweeping changes to the urban landscape such as those in Sittingbourne would not be desirable. Schemes such as the £1.9m Lottery-funded project to restore and improve the Faversham recreation ground will continue to play an important role in the ongoing regeneration of the borough. The council will continue to offer its backing to schemes such as the Faversham Creek swing bridge, and will also consider whether there is more that it can do to support the sustainability of vibrant high streets as centres for community life across the borough, even where this might involve difficult decisions about what constitutes sustainability in the age of online retail.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

All six objectives in this priority are closely interconnected. In view of what the renewal of run-down infrastructure can encompass, this objective also links with place-shaping (Objective 2.2) and potentially housing (Objective 2.4), while the likely significance of the Swallows and Beachfields sites to further regeneration in Sittingbourne and Sheerness give it a strong link with leisure (Objective 2.5). In addition, the potential for revenue-generating investment by the council – one of the key drivers of the Sittingbourne town centre project – links this objective strongly to council finances (Objective 3.1).

Objective 1.5:

Develop a coherent and flexible long-term plan to help Sheppey fulfil its potential for the benefit of all its residents.

The Isle of Sheppey offers a host of advantages to investors, businesses and residents, including affordable property values, proximity to London and the Channel ports, good connections to the strategic road and rail networks, superb natural landscapes including beaches and nature reserves, and a rich cultural and historical heritage. An increasing appreciation of these benefits in recent years has resulted in considerable inward investment, including major new retail and commercial development at Queenborough, expansion of the capabilities at the port of Sheerness and improvements to the infrastructure supporting the visitor economy.

Nevertheless, many communities on Sheppey continue to face significant socioeconomic disadvantage, with almost half of the island's neighbourhoods falling within the ten percent most deprived neighbourhoods in the country overall, based on the most recent deprivation figures. The origins of this hardship stretch all the way back to the post-war period, but the issues that maintain it today include poor educational provision, lack of local job opportunities, poor road and public transport connections around the island itself and, related to all of these, low land values which inhibit regeneration through development.

These are entrenched problems to which there are no simple solutions, but there are also huge opportunities: the port has plans for continued investment as set out in its 20-year masterplan, there remain good prospects for further commercial development, the housing-led regeneration of Queenborough and Rushenden is beginning to take shape, and the island's outstanding natural and heritage attractions will help the visitor economy to expand and diversify. The council will work with all willing partners to develop a flexible and multifaceted long-term plan to address the issues that hold Sheppey back and maximise the opportunities that will help it to improve its economic fortunes and close the gap between what the island is now and what it could and should be in the future.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

All six objectives in this priority are closely interconnected. The importance of development, infrastructure, leisure and culture to this objective also link it strongly with place-shaping (Objective 2.2), housing (Objective 2.4) and leisure (Objective 2.5). The need for the council to work better 'with the grain' of Sheppey's communities link this objective to the idea of greater differentiation in service delivery (Objective 3.2), while the self-evident need for the council to work in partnership with a wide range of statutory and community organisations also link it clearly with improved collaboration (Objective 3.4).

Objective 1.6:

Take steps to help the most disadvantaged families and communities to embrace opportunities from regeneration, skills provision and economic growth.

Like any district of its size, Swale is a mixture of affluent and less affluent neighbourhoods, but on average there is more deprivation in the borough than is typical either for the south-east or for England as a whole. This includes generally small pockets of highly concentrated poverty and disadvantage in locations right throughout the borough, including Faversham, Sheppey, Sittingbourne and the rural areas. The council's regeneration work in Sittingbourne town centre and elsewhere is intended to deliver benefits to all residents including improved facilities and a more attractive environment, but a key ambition has been the creation of new opportunities for our most disadvantaged residents to find jobs and improve their lives.

As the council seeks to extend its regeneration schemes and redouble its efforts to improve skills provision in the borough, there will be a need to ensure that these significant new opportunities are taken up by the local people who need them most. In some cases these residents, whether on a family-by-family or a neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood basis, will need tailored help to enable them to do this.

A number of the council's statutory- and community-sector partners are already engaged in this type of work, and the council will consider what more it can do to support and augment these efforts to ensure that regeneration schemes and new opportunities to acquire skills, as well as general economic growth, become the catalyst for sustainable improvement in the fortunes of our most disadvantaged residents and, by extension, of the places in which they live. In view of the high proportion of families living in poverty who are already in some form of work, this needs to be about helping not only unemployed people to find jobs but also people in insecure and low-paid work to find better jobs.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

All six objectives in this priority are closely interconnected. There is an unambiguous correlation between people's economic situation and their ability to access decent housing (Objective 2.4) and to take advantage of leisure and cultural opportunities (Objective 2.5), while the need to target more intensive help at a relatively small number of residents also links it with the idea of greater differentiation in service delivery (Objective 3.2).

Priority 2: Delivering improved quality of life

Objective 2.1:

Keep the borough clean and well-maintained, and continue to provide excellent environmental stewardship.

Collecting waste and recycling, together with keeping the streets free of litter, are two of a district council's most visible and universal functions, and among the most important on which residents typically judge our overall performance. The current waste, recycling and cleansing contract will be reviewed during the lifetime of the corporate plan, and in the context of rising costs and diminishing council resources this is likely to involve some difficult decisions about new methods of delivering the service and what can be achieved. Encouraging residents to support the council's recycling and litter objectives through education and incentives is likely to be key. The current grounds maintenance contract will expire during the lifetime of the corporate plan, and this will also require fresh thinking about how levels of performance can be maintained or enhanced at reduced levels of expenditure.

In common with Swale residents, the council is proud of the borough's outstanding natural environments and agricultural traditions, and wants to continue to safeguard these for future generations. About a quarter of Swale's population lives in rural areas, and the council recognises that the needs of these communities are often different to those in urban settlements, with different issues to address. Frequently these are problems which require the cooperation of other agencies to solve, and Swale is keen to understand how it can work better with parish councils to influence these agencies to take necessary action. People's quality of life in both rural and urban areas can be very adversely affected by environmental crime, antisocial behaviour and illegal encampments, underlining the ongoing importance of the council's strong stance on enforcement activities across a range of issues.

Extreme weather events in recent years have begun to demonstrate the reality of a changing climate, and the council will work with residents and businesses to help them prepare as well as possible for what is likely to be a hotter, dryer and more unpredictable climate in the future. Swale will also continue to work with local and national partners as best as we can to minimise the adverse impact of human activities in Swale on the environment, including using the planning system and other levers to reduce carbon emissions and taking steps to lessen reliance on single-use plastics.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

This objective has clear implications for the visitor economy, linking it with Objective 1.3, while the high value of the main contracts involved (primarily waste and

recycling collection, street cleansing and grounds maintenance) mean these issues are of central importance to council finances (Objective 3.1). The conflict between the need to keep the borough looking its best and the need to make further savings on contracts can only be resolved on a case-by-case basis as current contracts expire, but a more commercial approach to understanding the cost implications of decisions (Objective 3.1) has prompted the council to find alternatives to taking on responsibility for green spaces in new developments (Objective 2.2).

Objective 2.2:

Maximise opportunities from sustainable development to improve infrastructure and create attractive and functional new neighbourhoods.

The local plan *Bearing Fruits*, adopted after extensive public consultation and scrutiny in 2017, sets out the council's vision for Swale in 15 years' time, seeking to create a sustainable and flourishing borough in which to enjoy life and do business, with a thriving Faversham, a rejuvenated Sheppey, a transformed Sittingbourne and successful rural communities. Like many local authorities, especially in the south-east, Swale is under huge pressure from government to increase housing numbers, with the stark reality that if centrally imposed targets are not achieved in a planned way then they will be achieved by developers winning planning appeals even for the most unsuitable sites, generally against the interests of the borough and its existing residents.

It is important that the council takes a realistic and pragmatic approach to this situation, seeking to maximise the potential benefits of development and thoughtful place-making while minimising the adverse consequences. The recent 'looking ahead' consultation raised the option of completely new settlements as an alternative to further extensions of existing towns and villages, and this could represent an opportunity to think more strategically about where developments should be situated, how they should be designed and what infrastructure and facilities are necessary to make them viable.

More generally, many parts of the borough are in need of very significant investment in infrastructure, including improvements and additions to junctions on the M2 and A249, and the council cannot ignore the possibility that major housing developments could be one of the very few ways open to it to secure at least some of that investment.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

The regenerative potential of new development link this objective clearly with regeneration (Objective 1.4) and the plan for Sheppey (Objective 1.5), while the vital importance of adequate infrastructure in enabling any economy to compete

internationally means it is also strongly linked with economic growth and jobs (Objective 1.1). The tension between long-term housing needs and air-quality concerns link this objective with air quality (Objective 2.3) and housing (Objective 2.4). In addition, the continuing importance for the foreseeable future of the new homes bonus also link this objective to council finances (Objective 3.1).

Objective 2.3:

Work with partners to develop measures to address air quality issues throughout the borough.

Air quality and the presence of pollutants from vehicle emissions in the air we all breathe has become a high-profile issue both nationally and locally in recent years. Poor air quality is associated with a number of health impacts, including the onset of heart disease and cancer, and more vulnerable groups of residents are typically worse affected than others, including children, older people, and those with pre-existing conditions. While Swale's air quality issues are far from exceptional, the council has been proactive in monitoring pollutants, and has declared a higher number of air quality management areas (AQMAs) than is typical for a borough of this size.

The council is currently developing a strategic air quality action plan (AQAP) covering the whole borough for the period 2018-2022, which will establish targets for reductions in the concentration of pollutants and in exposure to pollution. While the preparation of the strategy is a district council function, Swale is dependent on other levels of government for the most 'strategic' actions to improve air quality (e.g. central government in incentivising lower-emission vehicles, or KCC in determining highway improvement priorities).

Working with these and other partners, the strategic action plan will focus on reducing emissions from goods vehicles, facilitating smoother traffic flows through AQMAs, promoting alternatives to car and motor vehicle use for both people and freight, and using the planning system to neutralise the impact of housebuilding, for example by encouraging low-emission developments. The council will also encourage tree-planting across the borough, which can have a range of beneficial effects in addition to helping to remove pollutants from the environment.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

The fact that vehicular carbon emissions are a major contributor to an area's overall greenhouse gas emissions link this objective clearly with the wider environment and climate change (Objective 2.1). The tension between long-term housing needs and complex air-quality concerns link this objective with place-making (Objective 2.2) and housing (Objective 2.4), while the improvement in air quality which can result from infrastructure enhancement represents another link with Objective 2.2.

Objective 2.4:

Develop a pragmatic and adaptable approach to helping local families to access affordable decent housing.

What is commonly referred to by the media and even cabinet ministers as the nationwide 'housing crisis' is in Swale a group of interrelated issues which have combined to make it increasingly difficult for families from across the demographic spectrum to access decent housing or achieve their aspiration of home ownership. These issues include elevated property values which make it harder for people to take the first step on the housing ladder, disincentives for landlords which reduce the number of rental properties available, and reforms to the social security system which have significantly reduced the incomes of the poorest families, including those in work.

The crisis is most acutely affecting poor families, who can no longer afford the homes in the private rented sector which are now occupied by more affluent people who in past generations would have expected to be owner-occupiers. These are for the most part issues over which the council has little control, but in view of the huge impact on residents' quality of life there is a need for us to do what we can to help.

The council will continue to work in close partnership with the borough's housing associations to maximise the number of homes being made available for affordable and social rents, and will work cooperatively with housebuilders and social landlords to ensure that the number of affordable homes achieved through development is as great as possible in spite of viability issues, being clear that developments need to include a balanced mix of housing types and tenures.

The full effects of the Homelessness Reduction Act on vulnerable households in Swale are still being assessed, but the housing options team will continue to seek out new initiatives and partnerships to prevent homelessness and reduce its impact on both the welfare of families and the finances of the council. Where innovative schemes for ensuring lower-income households have access to decent housing appear to have worked in other areas, the council will vigorously pursue options for implementing the learning in Swale.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

Housing links with many of the objectives under the first priority in this plan, including regeneration (Objective 1.4), a long-term plan for Sheppey (Objective 1.5) and targeted help for disadvantaged families (Objective 1.6). It also links with place-shaping (Objective 2.2) and public health and leisure (Objective 2.5), while the need for strong partnerships to deliver solutions links it clearly with improved collaboration (Objective 3.4).

Objective 2.5:

Promote improved health, wellbeing and enjoyment of life by facilitating and supporting a wide range of sporting, cultural and other leisure activities.

District councils play a major role in the prevention of ill-health through the provision of sports and leisure facilities including leisure centres, green and other open spaces, and opportunities for communities to come together in shared activities and events. These can have beneficial effects not only on physical health but also on mental wellbeing, including helping people to overcome the increasingly common problem of loneliness.

Public Health England estimates that Swale has the second-highest proportion of overweight or obese adults of any district in the south-east, as well as a significant issue with health inequality, most starkly illustrated in the difference of up to nine years in average life expectancy between the borough's most and least affluent neighbourhoods. The causes of these phenomena are complex and require concerted action by a wide range of local partners to tackle, but for the council it is important to ensure that all residents can access opportunities to adopt healthier lifestyles and, where necessary, that they are encouraged and helped to take them up.

The council's leisure centres facilitate a wide range of activities aimed at both prevention of ill-health and recovery from acute episodes, some targeted at specific demographic audiences, as well as enabling social prescribing by GPs; these activities will be augmented by the additional £2m which is currently being invested. The borough's open spaces host many activities run by commercial providers, while the Active Lives Framework guides the council's support to the voluntary sector in broadening residents' opportunities to improve their activity levels.

Going forwards, the expiry of the current leisure centre contract in 2025 is an opportunity to think strategically about the long-term needs of the borough and how (and where) these can best be met given limited council resources, and work will begin on this in earnest during the lifetime of this corporate plan. The council will also consider what more it can do to support voluntary and community organisations who want to run activities in the borough, including promoting events and helping them to access third-party funding.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

The potential opportunities for regeneration which could result from changes to the configuration – or even location – of existing leisure centres link this priority clearly with regeneration (Objective 1.4) and the plan for Sheppey (Objective 1.5), while

enhancing the borough's vibrancy by supporting cultural and sporting opportunities has clear links to the visitor economy (Objective 1.3).

Further housing growth implies a need to review the adequacy (quantity and quality) of leisure provision in all parts of the borough, linking this objective with place-shaping (Objective 2.2), while the recognition that the council's role in sport and culture is often a facilitative one rather than one of direct provision means that this objective is also strongly linked with the need to maintain and deepen our partnerships with other organisations, particularly in the community sector (Objective 3.4).

CONSULTATION DRAFT

Priority 3:

Delivering the council of tomorrow

Objective 3.1:

Continue to reduce dependence on government-controlled funding sources and support innovative ways to ensure other objectives can be met in the context of diminished resources.

The impact of austerity on local authorities has been disproportionate to that of most central government departments, with core grant funding expected by the LGA to be cut by 77 percent during the five years to 2020. Swale has not been immune to these difficulties, with its revenue budget having shrunk by 16 percent since 2010, but with prudent management it has been able to set and achieve balanced budgets every year while also increasing reserves by 93 percent over the same period. With both a low council tax base and a relatively high-needs population, Swale has lost out disproportionately from the phasing out of revenue support grant, but its ability to accommodate commercial growth has meant that it has benefited greatly from the shift towards local retention of business rate income.

There are further uncertainties on the horizon for local government funding, including the 2019 comprehensive spending review, the fair funding review, and the lack of clarity on the detail of the government's stated intention of moving to 75 percent local retention of business rates as early as 2020/21. The medium-term outlook for investment yields is uncertain, and the effect of the forthcoming reset of the business rates baseline could have an adverse impact on Swale. The council is currently making very significant property investments in Sittingbourne town centre, income from which will start to come on stream from 2019/20, but this will not mean that the overall size of the annual budget will not be subject to further decreases.

Financial impacts therefore need to be a central consideration in all the council's decision-making over the lifetime of this plan, whether in terms of fully understanding the cost implications of those decisions, including ongoing revenue costs, or of identifying potential ways of using new initiatives to reduce costs or generate revenue. In view of its ability to grow business rate income, Swale has so far generally avoided the commercial ventures which have been attempted by other councils. However, where Swale can learn from commercial organisations is in promoting a wider understanding among managers and staff of the financial costs and benefits of the whole spectrum of its activities, and the importance of these to its overall effectiveness as an organisation.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

This objective is inextricably linked with all the other objectives in the plan. Nothing can be achieved without resources, and the need to ensure that the costs and benefits of competing spending proposals are fully understood so that every last drop of value to the borough is wrung from every pound we spend will unavoidably be of central importance to all council decisions over the lifetime of this plan.

Objective 3.2:

Experiment with a more differentiated approach to service delivery for key neighbourhoods and key groups of customers.

Like any council, Swale provides different services to different customer groups in different ways, from universal services such as waste collection through to the intensive one-to-one assistance offered to people at risk of homelessness. Nonetheless, there is scope for us to think more carefully about how we can tailor services to a more nuanced understanding of the specific needs of certain customers and certain communities.

Clearly, where this would involve an increase in costs, this would need to be carefully weighed against any potential benefits, but this is not to say that, for example, a more expensive but less problematic way of collecting refuse and recycling from the borough's terraced streets could not be rendered cost-effective. The same is potentially true of the help the council offers to individual families, particularly where a more expensive way of working would result in positive changes which meant that the family was less of a drain on public resources in the long term.

As in many areas of the country, Swale appears to be suffering from a rise in the proportion of people who refuse to recognise the adverse impact their behaviour has on the quality of life of those around them, a phenomenon which manifests itself in a range of ways, whether dropping litter, inconsiderate parking or being nuisance neighbours.

The council will consider ways in which it can use a more differentiated approach to service delivery as one side of a 'new deal' with neighbourhoods and individuals, in which the council will seek better to understand what causes people to behave in adverse ways and offer them more tailored help to change that behaviour, but on the understanding that in the interests of other residents and the wider community it will not hesitate to push for the strongest penalties against those who are unwilling to make use of that help to improve their behaviour.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

The recognition that some neighbourhoods and families could benefit from services delivered to them in a more bespoke way links this objective to disadvantaged

families (Objective 1.6) and potentially housing (Objective 2.4). The need for absolute clarity on the financial costs and benefits of trialling new approaches represents a strong link with council finances (Objective 3.1), while the need for imagination and experimentation is a link to innovation (Objective 3.3). Finally, the likelihood that new approaches to service delivery would be more effective if they were offered on a multi-agency or 'team-around-the-family' basis also links this objective with improved collaboration (Objective 3.4).

Objective 3.3:

Encourage innovative ideas at every level of the organisation and embed the Swale Manager programme to ensure consistent understanding of the council's expectations of all managers.

Many of the council's services are broadly transactional in nature, in the sense that their primary purpose is to move relatively high volumes of customers from a starting state to a finishing state along a fairly predictable – albeit often complex – transactional pathway. These services can be regarded as systems, and the simpler and more predictable the system can be made, the cheaper and more effectively it can be run. The people who understand the system best, and who are best placed to develop ideas for improving it, are the people who work in it, and the council therefore needs to continue to support and encourage people at all levels of the organisation to experiment and take controlled risks in trying out new ideas to make their systems better.

The council will continue its strategy of promoting 'digital by choice' as a means of harnessing the ability of technology to make transactional services cheaper to run and easier to use without creating barriers for residents who are unable to access services online. The same encouragement of innovative ideas in support of better or cheaper outcomes also needs to be in place of course for people working in less transactional services.

As the council's financial resources have diminished in recent years, successive changes to the management structure have seen ever fewer senior managers taking on accountability for ever wider ranges of services. The long-term sustainability of this development is dependent on the capacity of less senior managers to take greater responsibility for ensuring their teams operate in a way which is consistent with corporate objectives and compliant with corporate governance requirements.

The council will therefore continue its roll-out of the Swale Manager programme, aimed at ensuring that all council managers are equipped with the same knowledge of what is expected of them as managers and how to achieve it. We will also instigate a new forum of heads of service and key managers as a 'corporate

leadership team' charged primarily with overseeing and developing the corporate culture.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

The need to encourage innovative and experimental ideas at all levels and across all teams in the organisation links this objective to most of the other objectives in this plan, but perhaps particularly to some of the most intractable issues, including the plan for Sheppey (Objective 1.5), disadvantaged families (Objective 1.6), housing (Objective 2.4) and leisure (Objective 2.5). The essence of the Swale Manager programme is about ensuring that all council managers have an adequate understanding of the complex framework within which the council takes decisions, linking this objective clearly to governance (Objective 3.5).

Objective 3.4:

Develop new approaches to partnership working based on shared objectives with statutory agencies, other councils, and the private and voluntary sectors.

Public services in Swale are provided through a highly fragmented landscape of agencies, each operating with different objectives and different geographical footprints. To some extent the reduced cohesion which results from this does cause Swale residents to be disadvantaged in comparison, for example, to a metropolitan borough with fewer agencies all focused on broadly the same geographical area. This situation is compounded for districts such as Swale by the lack of attention which shire areas have received in successive waves of government decentralisation initiatives, in which city regions have occasionally benefited from real improvement in their ability to tackle issues including unemployment, low skills and poor transport.

The council has long understood that it does not have the resources, the powers or the knowledge to address the borough's most entrenched problems on its own, and it already benefits from participation in a range of productive partnerships with local and national organisations from the statutory, voluntary and private sectors. In recent years however, as the financial situation of many partners has deteriorated, their capacity for engagement has also diminished.

Going forwards, Swale will try to sustain and where necessary re-energise joint initiatives with individual partners on a bilateral or multilateral basis to work on shared objectives in areas such as crime, health and mental health, but will be clear that it will not waste its resources on unproductive 'talking shops'. Swale will also explore options for strategic partnerships with other councils and major agencies on a larger geographical footprint than our own borough, focused primarily on shared opportunities for regeneration and devolution.

At the more local end of the spectrum, we will take steps to strengthen our relationships with town and parish councils as partners in realising shared ambitions for local communities. In a similar vein, we will continue to work closely with the highly-valued services offered to residents by the voluntary and community sector in the borough, including where relevant helping them to take advantage of third-party funding opportunities.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

The need to work in partnership to achieve shared ambitions underpins all the objectives of the first two priorities in this plan. Regeneration schemes (Objective 1.1) invariably depend on complex partnering arrangements with commercial developers and other agencies, while growing the economy (Objective 1.2) and improving skills (Objective 1.3) will require the continuation of close links with businesses and providers. Any long-term plan for Sheppey (Objective 1.4) will need the buy-in and support of a wide range of strategic and operational partners, as will our desire to help disadvantaged families take advantage of new opportunities (Objective 1.5), while the visitor economy framework (Objective 1.6) has been developed precisely as a means of clarifying how the council will support and collaborate with local businesses and community organisations.

Partnership working with the private and statutory sector will also be essential in keeping the borough clean (Objective 2.1), place-shaping (Objective 2.2), improving air quality (Objective 2.3) and developing new housing solutions (Objective 2.4), but our ability to support a broad spectrum of potential providers will be of particular importance in ensuring access to a wide range of leisure, sporting and cultural activities (Objective 2.5).

**Objective 3.5:
Continue to ensure that Swale's internal governance and decision-making are second to none.**

Local authorities operate within a complex legal framework which sets limits to their powers and determines how they are structured and how they make decisions. In addition to these formal, externally mandated elements of good governance, the council strives to be an organisation which is responsive to the needs of the residents it serves, rational and transparent in the way it spends public money, and ethical in its behaviour, and that of its members and officers, at all times.

It is in the nature of a corporate plan that it sets the strategic direction for an organisation over a given period of time but cannot envisage the detail of how that direction will unfold in the hundreds of individual decisions that will be taken by the organisation over its lifetime. Good governance – that is, the assurance that those decisions will be taken with accountability, objectivity and integrity, and in a way

which follows a definite and comprehensible process – is therefore the essential foundation of all the priorities and objectives established in this plan.

With this in mind, the council will continue to promote understanding of its constitution and values by everyone in the organisation, making incremental improvements to these as needs and opportunities present themselves. Good governance also requires a sound approach to identifying and managing uncertainty and risk, and the council will continue to develop its risk management framework over the lifetime of this plan.

Links between this objective and others in the plan:

As with ensuring that there are adequate financial resources and adequate control over those resources (Objective 3.1), robust organisational governance is a prerequisite for achieving all of the objectives in this plan.

CONSULTATION DRAFT