

**Swale Borough Council**

# **Working together for a better borough**

**Corporate Plan 2020-2023**

# Summary of priorities and objectives

## **Priority 1:**

### **Building the right homes in the right places and supporting quality jobs for all**

- 1.1 Use the local plan review to ensure that future housing delivery is more closely aligned to the borough's ability and capacity to provide for genuine sustainable housing needs, in terms of location, type and tenure, and that the impact of housing growth is offset through improved physical, environmental, social and health infrastructure.
- 1.2 Work with registered providers, developers and community-led housing groups to pursue all viable opportunities for increasing the supply of affordable and social housing across the borough, and ensure that standards in the private rented sector are robustly enforced.
- 1.3 Encourage the development and innovation of high-quality sustainable housing on brownfield land in urban centres, with an appropriate range of tenure options, improving the appearance, biodiversity, and economic and environmental sustainability of our towns.
- 1.4 Develop a new economic improvement strategy to encourage the role of a living wage and expand the range of employment opportunities in the borough, including higher-skilled employment.
- 1.5 Support residents and businesses to improve the borough's vocational skill levels, and vigorously pursue all opportunities to enhance the provision and accessibility of further and higher education for Swale residents at all stages of their careers.
- 1.6 Implement the visitor economy framework to increase investment, address new visitor demands and grow the value of the sector to the Swale economy.

## **Priority 2:**

### **Investing in our environment and responding positively to global challenges**

- 2.1 Develop a coherent strategy to address the climate and ecological emergencies, aiming for carbon neutrality in the council's own operations by 2025 and in the whole borough by 2030, and pursue all opportunities to enhance biodiversity across the borough.
- 2.2 Encourage active travel and reduced car use, including through the permeability of new developments, and work with partners to address air quality issues.
- 2.3 Establish a special projects fund to provide much-needed capital investment in the borough's public realm and open spaces.
- 2.4 Recognise and support our local heritage to give people pride in the place they live and boost the local tourism industry.

- 2.5 Work towards a cleaner borough where recycling remains a focus, and ensure that the council acts as an exemplar environmental steward, making space for nature wherever possible.

**Priority 3:**

**Tackling deprivation and creating equal opportunities for everyone**

- 3.1 Undertake targeted interventions to identify our most disadvantaged families and communities, improve our understanding of the issues they face, and develop new ways of working to reduce social exclusion and enhance opportunities and quality of life.
- 3.2 Reduce health inequality by developing more productive relationships with local health partners and making health and wellbeing a central consideration in all relevant council decision-making, recognising especially the link between housing and health.
- 3.3 Develop a communitarian approach to partnership working based on shared objectives with like-minded agencies in the voluntary and community sectors.
- 3.4 Ensure that the council plays a proactive role in reducing crime and antisocial behaviour, including through the modernisation of CCTV provision.
- 3.5 Promote wellbeing and enjoyment of life by signposting and encouraging a wide range of sporting, cultural and other leisure activities appropriate and accessible to each age group.

**Priority 4:**

**Renewing local democracy and making the council fit for the future**

- 4.1 Review the council's constitution to diffuse decision-making power more widely among elected members and improve the transparency, responsiveness and public accountability of that decision-making.
- 4.2 Ensure that all elected members are appropriately supported to lead and improve the council's engagement with its disparate geographic and demographic communities, and encourage especially the participation of underrepresented groups in the democratic process.
- 4.3 Develop a cross-departmental corporate ethos focused on the priorities in this plan, and embed the Swale Manager programme to ensure a consistent understanding of the council's expectations of all managers.
- 4.4 Continue to reduce dependence on government-controlled funding sources and support staff to find innovative ways to ensure other objectives can be met in the context of diminished resources.

# Foreword

[To be added in designed version]

## Introduction

The corporate plan is the overarching statement of the council's strategic priorities for the period April 2020 to March 2023. It consists of 20 medium-term objectives grouped into four broad priorities. Between them, these 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 60km from central London in one direction and 40km from the Channel tunnel in the other. The borough covers an area of 360km<sup>2</sup>, 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 more industrial market town of Sittingbourne, which in recent years has been the focus of major council-led redevelopment. These urban centres are connected both physically and culturally by the borough's extensive and important rural areas, accounting for around a quarter of the population, which take in a number of protected wildlife habitats 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 communities, but in general the area is less well-off than is typical for the south-east, and there are some concentrated pockets of severe socioeconomic disadvantage to be found in locations across the borough. While the causes of this are deep-rooted and complex, the outcome is that a proportion of our residents suffer from entrenched inequality and a lack of opportunities which the council needs to do what it can to address.

The indices of multiple deprivation are calculated by government based on a range of measures of poverty and associated disadvantage, and were last published in 2019. Compared to the previous time the figures were calculated in 2015, Swale's overall position on the indices deteriorated relative to other places, with the borough now the 69th most disadvantaged of 317 shire districts in England, and the second most disadvantaged in Kent.

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. However, it remains the case that much of the borough's employment, including employment created in the last few years, is at the lower end of the skills spectrum.

The borough council is made up of 47 elected members representing 24 wards and employing around 280 full-time equivalent staff. The all-out election held in May 2019 resulted in the loss by the Conservative group of its longstanding majority and the formation of a five-group coalition administration including the Labour, Swale Independents Alliance, Liberal Democrat, Green and Independent groups. The coalition benefits from a clearly articulated shared programme for its term of office, which forms the basis of the objectives outlined in this plan.

The financial crash of 2008 and the period of austerity which followed it have wrought huge changes to the landscape of local government and the services it provides over the last decade. Swale has not been immune to this, but its successes in expanding the business-rate base enabled it to benefit disproportionately from the move away from formula-based revenue support grant towards local retention of business-rate growth.

With the future parameters of the local government funding regime still very unclear, it is difficult to forecast the extent of likely gaps in the council's revenue budget over the next few years. What is much less uncertain is that financial sustainability will remain a key concern for the organisation over the next few years, with financial constraints representing a significant brake on what the council is able to achieve.

The first three priorities in this plan set out the objectives for the borough and its residents 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 is in part about finding ways to obviate or minimise this impact.

# **Priority 1:**

## **Building the right homes in the right places and supporting quality jobs for all**

There is widespread recognition of the fact that the UK's housing market is fundamentally broken, with the dream of home ownership – or even of a tenancy which is secure, decent and affordable – an unattainable one for growing numbers of people. The effects of this crisis are to be felt in the lived experience of families across Swale, whether the high cost of rent is impeding their ability to save for a deposit, or whether they are facing homelessness as a result of a no-fault eviction from a shorthold tenancy.

The government recognises that there is a problem, but its only strategy for solving it is as ineffectual as it is unimaginative and one-dimensional. Simply obliging local councils to grant ever higher numbers of planning consents with insufficient mechanisms to ensure that the housing which is built is what local people actually need and can afford, or that it comes with adequate GPs, school places and transport links, has engendered general public hostility to development and created another unwelcome fissure in our already polarised society.

While the council is bound to follow the law in planning for housing growth, we need to do everything we can within this system to ensure that what is built reflects the needs and preferences of local people and that the adverse effects of development on communities is offset by properly funded infrastructure.

Clearly, the optimal solutions to the crisis cannot only be about building homes for sale, even if there is a need to maximise the proportion of these which cater to genuine community needs and which are sold at 'affordable' prices. We will therefore seek innovative partnership arrangements with housing associations and others to enable us to invest in social housing available for rent as well as shared and affordable ownership. The council will also use the full extent of its legal powers to advance the legitimate expectations of the borough's private-sector tenants in terms of the decency, safety and sustainability of their homes and the security of their tenancies.

Swale has seen some genuine successes in expanding and diversifying its economy in recent years, but there is still a long way to go before the borough is able to offer residents the range and quality of local employment opportunities which are available in a more typical south-eastern district.

The council will adopt a new economic improvement strategy to encourage particularly higher-skilled jobs into the borough, and to promote the economic benefits of a more widespread adoption of a living wage for workers no matter what their skill level. We

will also work with businesses to implement the recently agreed visitor economy framework, increasing the value of the sector to Swale's economy and helping small business owners to innovate and grow their businesses.

In the 2019 indices of multiple deprivation, Swale is ranked the 28th most disadvantaged of England's 317 shire districts on the domain covering education and skills, making it the worst performer in Kent on this measure. The issue of skills and education is a complex one in which the council plays only an indirect role, but the problem is so significant for the borough that it demands our focus. This cannot be solely about addressing the unfairness of the lack of further education provision for Swale's young people, although that is certainly vital, but must also address the need to give people at all stages of their careers opportunities to upskill and retrain.

The six objectives towards which we want to work under this priority are:

- 1.1 Use the local plan review to ensure that future housing delivery is more closely aligned to the borough's ability and capacity to provide for genuine sustainable housing needs, in terms of location, type and tenure, and that the impact of housing growth is offset through improved physical, environmental, social and health infrastructure.
- 1.2 Work with registered providers, developers and community-led housing groups to pursue all viable opportunities for increasing the supply of affordable and social housing across the borough, and ensure that standards in the private rented sector are robustly enforced.
- 1.3 Encourage the development and innovation of high-quality sustainable housing on brownfield land in urban centres, with an appropriate range of tenure options, improving the appearance, biodiversity, and economic and environmental sustainability of our towns.
- 1.4 Develop a new economic improvement strategy to encourage the role of a living wage and expand the range of employment opportunities in the borough, including higher-skilled employment.
- 1.5 Support residents and businesses to improve the borough's vocational skill levels, and vigorously pursue all opportunities to enhance the provision and accessibility of further and higher education for Swale residents at all stages of their careers.
- 1.6 Implement the visitor economy framework to increase investment, address new visitor demands and grow the value of the sector to the Swale economy.

## **Priority 2: Investing in our environment and responding positively to global challenges**

The rate at which humans have been burning fossil fuels since the industrial revolution has already caused irreversible climate change, with global temperatures having increased by one degree Celsius from the preindustrial period. Given the damage which has already occurred, it is inevitable that temperatures will continue to increase, causing floods and extreme weather events, and the race is now on to reduce emissions enough to keep the rise below two degrees. A further consequence of our collective attitude to earth's delicate ecosystems in the last two hundred years is an unprecedented rate of species extinctions, with up to a million species now threatened with extinction within decades.

Together these global problems represent a grave threat to the wellbeing of humanity, and demand urgent and radical action not only from national governments but from local ones as well. Swale has recognised this urgency, declaring a climate and ecological emergency in June 2019 which established the goals of net-zero carbon emissions from our own operations by 2025 and in the borough as a whole by 2030.

While the global situation requires concerted local action over the medium term, there are plenty of local environmental issues which also need to be addressed. Poor air quality – largely a further consequence of burning fossil fuels – is associated with a number of serious health impacts, including cancer and heart disease, and more vulnerable people are typically worse affected than others, including children, older people, those with pre-existing conditions and those living in poorer areas. Swale will work with KCC and other partners to ensure that action plans to improve air quality are developed and implemented wherever they are needed.

For several years the council has consistently underspent on its revenue budget, with the difference between budgeted and actual expenditure being added to reserves, which have almost doubled since 2010. While it would generally not be prudent to use these reserves to mitigate what is likely to be a very tough position in the revenue budget over the life of this plan, there is no reason not to use a proportion of them to support one-off capital investments. Recognising that this is money which belongs to the people of Swale, we will use some of it to begin to rectify many years of underinvestment in the sort of small-scale shared community assets which can go a long way towards making somewhere a good place to live.

Keeping the borough's streets clean and minimising the amount of household waste sent to landfill are two of the council's most elementary and most visible functions. The current waste and cleansing contract has been economically advantageous for Swale,



but the ageing waste collection fleet has recently combined with other issues to render the contract increasingly unreliable. With the waste contract accounting for so high a proportion of both our carbon emissions and our revenue expenditure, the council will need over the life of this plan to give careful consideration to the specification it requires for the service when the current contract expires in 2023.

The five objectives towards which we want to work under this priority are:

- 2.1 Develop a coherent strategy to address the climate and ecological emergencies, aiming for carbon neutrality in the council's own operations by 2025 and in the whole borough by 2030, and pursue all opportunities to enhance biodiversity across the borough.
- 2.2 Encourage active travel and reduced car use, including through the permeability of new developments, and work with partners to address air quality issues.
- 2.3 Establish a special projects fund to provide much-needed capital investment in the borough's public realm and open spaces.
- 2.4 Recognise and support our local heritage to give people pride in the place they live and boost the local tourism industry.
- 2.5 Work towards a cleaner borough where recycling remains a focus, and ensure that the council acts as an exemplar environmental steward, making space for nature wherever possible.

## Priority 3: Tackling deprivation and creating equal opportunities for everyone

Poverty is a significant issue for many of Swale's residents and communities, detracting from people's quality of life and holding them back from achieving their potential both for themselves and for their community. In the 2019 indices of multiple deprivation, Swale is ranked the 74th most disadvantaged of England's 317 shire districts on the income domain, making the borough more relatively disadvantaged on this measure than was the case in 2015. Across the whole range of indicators on which the indices are based, almost one-fifth of Swale's statistical neighbourhoods are among the ten percent most disadvantaged in the country, including no fewer than half of the 26 neighbourhoods on Sheppey.

The increasing extremity of both wealth and poverty is clearly a national (and indeed international) issue which would require concerted government action to address comprehensively, but councils can still work with other local agencies to make a real difference. Swale will take a collaborative approach to understanding how disadvantage affects individual families and communities and what the council and our partners in other local agencies can most effectively do to help. Our aim is to cultivate a borough in which residents and communities work together to address the issues that hold them back, and where the council plays an active role in supporting and facilitating a vibrant and engaged voluntary and community sector.

One of the most significant areas in which poverty and associated disadvantage blight people's lives is health and wellbeing, with average life expectancy in Swale's most deprived neighbourhoods being up to eight years lower than in the least deprived. As with disadvantage in general, health – and in particular the promotion of good health rather than the treatment of poor health – is central to the objectives of multiple agencies, but arguably few more so than district councils. While working to strengthen links with local bodies in the health and related sectors, Swale will also ensure that the health implications of the services it offers and the way it offers them are given more prominence when decisions about those services are being made.

The five objectives towards which we want to work under this priority are:

- 3.1 Undertake targeted interventions to identify our most disadvantaged families and communities, improve our understanding of the issues they face, and develop new ways of working to reduce social exclusion and enhance opportunities and quality of life.

- 3.2 Reduce health inequality by developing more productive relationships with local health partners and making health and wellbeing a central consideration in all relevant council decision-making, recognising especially the link between housing and health.
- 3.3 Develop a communitarian approach to partnership working based on shared objectives with like-minded agencies in the voluntary and community sectors.
- 3.4 Ensure that the council plays a proactive role in reducing crime and antisocial behaviour, including through the modernisation of CCTV provision.
- 3.5 Promote wellbeing and enjoyment of life by signposting and encouraging a wide range of sporting, cultural, leisure and development activities appropriate and accessible to each age group.

## **Priority 4: Renewing local democracy and making the council fit for the future**

The last of the priorities in this plan is focused on the council as an organisation, but it is not intended to be inward-looking. The principal purpose of a district council is to further the interests and wellbeing of its local area, and this priority is about the internal changes we need to make in order to sustain and improve our ability to do this effectively.

The economic and political events of the last ten years have combined with new ways for people to exchange news and opinions to create a polarisation of political views and a pervasive lack of trust in public institutions and public servants at all levels. While scepticism and criticism are vital components of a democracy, a widespread lack of belief that political action can or should result in real improvements in people's lives is as unhealthy as it is erroneous.

While this is a national malaise, its effects within Swale have arguably been heightened by the council's constitutional arrangements, which concentrate decision-making power in the hands of a small number of councillors and leave other democratically-elected representatives largely disenfranchised. Going forwards, the council will identify and trial ways to reverse this trend and to help all councillors fulfil their mission of giving voice to their constituents' views and helping those constituents to engage with the decisions which will affect their lives.

Another way in which the events of the last decade have affected communities is austerity, which has resulted in significant year-on-year reductions in government funding to councils since 2010. According to the Local Government Association, over the last eight years councils will have lost 60p out of every £1 the government used to provide in core funding to pay for local services.

Swale has not been immune from these measures, but has been able to use government schemes such as the new homes bonus and – especially – the local retention of business-rate growth to cushion the effects of the loss of core funding. Overall Swale's revenue budget has fallen by almost a fifth since 2010. Looking ahead, the future framework for funding local authorities remains extremely unclear, but whatever formula is eventually adopted in Westminster it is unlikely that Swale will be able to weather the storm as well as it has done in the recent past.

By this stage there is a vast amount of national evidence about the efficacy of councils' efforts both to supplement their income through greater commercialisation and to minimise the impact of funding reductions by increasing efficiency. Swale has already

acquired a good deal of experience in both of these endeavours, but will need to continue to learn lessons from other councils about what can be made to work and what cannot in terms of generating and saving money as government funding continues to diminish.

The overall goal must be to deliver on the objectives of this corporate plan as successfully as possible notwithstanding the straitened financial circumstances, and for this we will be dependent on a motivated and engaged workforce who understand what the council wants to achieve and are empowered to find innovative ways of achieving it at ever lower cost. A core role of the management team will therefore be to create the conditions for every team and every employee to thrive and do their best for the borough and the community we serve.

The four objectives towards which we want to work under this priority are:

- 4.1 Review the council's constitution to diffuse decision-making power more widely among elected members and improve the transparency, responsiveness and public accountability of that decision-making.
- 4.2 Ensure that all elected members are appropriately supported to lead and improve the council's engagement with its disparate geographic and demographic communities, and encourage especially the participation of underrepresented groups in the democratic process.
- 4.3 Develop a cross-departmental corporate ethos focused on the priorities in this plan, and embed the Swale Manager programme to ensure a consistent understanding of the council's expectations of all managers.
- 4.4 Continue to reduce dependence on government-controlled funding sources and support staff to find innovative ways to ensure other objectives can be met in the context of diminished resources.