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## ***Making Swale a Better Place***

### **Corporate Plan 2015-2018**

## **Foreword**

Welcome to *Making Swale a Better Place*, the Council's corporate plan for the period 2015 to 2018.

The purpose of the plan is to ensure that the Council's resources are allocated in a coherent, accountable and effective way, by setting out the three main priority themes which we will be working on over the next four years, together with the broad objectives we will pursue in support of these themes. Our priority themes for this period are:

- A Borough To Be Proud Of
- A Community To Be Proud Of
- A Council To Be Proud Of

Our previous corporate plan ran from 2011 to 2014. This was not always an easy period for local government, and Swale has had to shoulder its share of the funding reductions experienced by almost all public services during this time. The Council's response to these difficulties has been upbeat, enthusiastically embracing the need to devolve power over assets and services to the community, and continuing to make good progress with our ambitions for the regeneration of the Borough.

The scale of the national budget deficit is such that no matter who wins the 2015 general election there will be no end in sight to the austerity we have all lived through over these past four years. I am confident that this new corporate plan will enable Swale to face this challenging future in the same spirit that we have weathered the storm to date: working harder and more efficiently than ever, in close partnership with residents and other stakeholders, to drive forward our ambitions for the Borough and to fulfil our mission to make Swale a better place.

***Councillor Andrew Bowles, Leader of the Council***

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## Introduction

This corporate plan is the overarching statement of Swale Borough Council's strategic objectives for the period April 2015 to March 2018. It is structured around three high-level priority themes, each containing a limited number of objectives. Between them, these objectives articulate both local political aspirations and the organisation's response to anticipated changes in its wider operating environment.

The plan's primary purpose is to ensure that Council resources are coherently allocated in support of agreed priorities. The objectives established here will thus determine the focus of the Council's activities and expenditure for the duration of the plan, although they are intended to cover areas for change and development rather than encompassing everything that the Council does. They are supported by more detailed action-planning and budgeting processes, including the medium-term financial plan, strategies for tackling individual issues, and the annual budget-setting and service-planning rounds.

This is the Council's third corporate plan, the previous two having covered the periods 2007/08-2010/11 and 2011/12-2014/15. While it is important that the Council undertakes regular reviews of its strategic objectives to ensure that they remain the most appropriate ones in the light of emerging local issues and changes in the broader context within which the Council works, this does not mean that each new corporate plan should represent a radical departure from the last one.

Four years is not a long time in terms of strategic ambitions for a borough, and many of the Council's most significant aspirations for Swale will take longer than the lifetime of a single plan to realise. The Council has already had some major successes in achieving these long-term ambitions, and the prudent financial management of recent years means that it is well-placed to accomplish even more for the Borough over the lifetime of this new plan. The ways in which the priorities and objectives of this plan relate to those of previous plans is highlighted throughout the document.

## **The Council's purpose: Making Swale a better place**

The Council's statutory remit combines responsibility for a wide range of local government services with a focus on the Borough of Swale, one of the 12 districts which make up the county of Kent. Swale is located on the County's north coast between Medway, Maidstone and Canterbury, around 45 miles from London. It includes the towns of Sittingbourne, Faversham and Sheerness, as well as an extensive rural hinterland which takes in the whole of the Isle of Sheppey and part of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The Borough covers an area of 140 square miles, roughly one-tenth of Kent, and is home to 139,200 residents.

Swale's economy has historically been most strongly associated with manufacturing, port activities and agriculture, but the last 25 years have seen a successful diversification towards a broad range of small and medium-sized businesses. Swale is ranked by central government as the 99th least well-off area out of 326 in England<sup>1</sup>, meaning that on average our residents' socioeconomic wellbeing is among the lowest third of local authority areas in the country.

However, this overall figure masks considerable variation within the Borough, with affluent and up-and-coming areas sitting cheek-by-jowl with some of the worst-off neighbourhoods in the country. While prosperity is returning to most of the Borough following the recession, Swale still encompasses some pockets of entrenched poverty and disadvantage.

At the root of many of these issues is the decline of the traditional manufacturing base, with its need to employ large numbers of low-skilled workers. One of the legacies of Swale's industrial past is thus its 'skills gap', with a higher than average proportion of residents having insufficient skills to be competitive in the modern workplace, and fewer than average highly qualified professionals.

This relative lack of professional jobs and marketable skills means that unemployment remains higher than the regional average and salaries are lower. Associated with the pockets of poverty that these factors produce are a number of further demographic issues, particularly with regard to residents' health. Variations in lifestyle choices and in access to opportunities to improve health mean that average life expectancy is up to 10 years lower in the Borough's worst-off neighbourhoods than in its more affluent.

### **What do Swale's residents think of the Borough and of the Council?**

The Council runs an annual postal survey as a statistically robust way of assessing residents' views and priorities. In the 2014 survey, 57 per cent of residents said they were satisfied with the way the Council runs things locally, up from 39 per cent in 2010. This result would appear to mirror the national picture of satisfaction with, and trust in,

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the 2010 English Indices of Deprivation. Updated rankings will be published in Summer 2015.

local councils increasing, while that in national institutions is falling. Some 74 per cent of residents report that they are satisfied with their local area as a place to live.

The survey asks residents to list the five things they think are most important in making somewhere a good place to live, and the five things they think most need improving in their local area. The most popular answers have remained broadly the same for several years; those for 2014 are shown in Table 1, while some of the ways the Council is working to address the things in need of improvement are described on page 6.

<b>Most important in making somewhere a good place to live</b>	<b>Most in need of improvement in Swale</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Level of crime</li> <li>2. Clean streets</li> <li>3. Health services</li> <li>4. Good schools</li> <li>5. Road and pavement repairs</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Road and pavement repairs</li> <li>2. Activities for teenagers</li> <li>3. Job prospects</li> <li>4. Traffic congestion</li> <li>5. Shopping facilities</li> </ol>

*Table 1: Residents' views of what is important and what is in need of improvement*

### **What does the Council do to make Swale a better place?**

The Council is responsible for providing or commissioning a wide range of public services in the Borough. Many of these are concerned with its physical appearance and the amenities it offers, including street cleaning, leisure facilities, open spaces, and management of the countryside and coastline. The Council consults with residents to establish the planning framework within which building is permitted, and works with developers to oversee construction projects. It is actively engaged in economic development, promoting the Borough for tourism and inward investment, and supporting existing employers to thrive.

The Council also provides or commissions many services for individual customers, whether on a universal basis – such as household refuse collection and running national and local elections – or in a way which is targeted at people who are most in need. The latter include a wide range of housing-related services, such as accommodation for homeless households, home adaptations to keep people out of residential care, regulation of private landlords, and the administration of housing benefit. The Council is also actively involved in supporting people affected by crime and disorder, including domestic abuse sufferers.

In addition to the services provided by the Council, the fact that councillors are democratically elected by residents gives the Council a legitimate interest in all the ways in which public money is spent in the Borough and the issues it is intended to tackle. Many of the most entrenched problems experienced by some of Swale's communities – including low skills, worklessness, and poor health – are more directly the concern of other agencies with wider geographical remits, but the Council is

ambitious to play its part in working with and influencing those agencies to agree joint priorities and deliver the best solutions for Swale.

### **What is the Council's track record in making Swale a better place?**

The Council has a strong track record in optimising the use of its limited resources to make Swale a better place and improve facilities and opportunities for the people who live and work here. Over the past year, for example, the Council has:

- delivered a highly successful regeneration conference to raise awareness of Swale's advantages as an investment location, attracting keynote speakers including Lord Digby Jones and the Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP, who described the Borough as 'a superb location to do business';
- rolled out a new waste collection arrangement with contractor Biffa, developed and signed in partnership with Kent County Council and Ashford and Maidstone Borough Councils, which will enable residents to separate food waste for composting and increase recycling rates by over a third by 2016, while saving Swale taxpayers at least £800,000 per annum; and
- worked with community representatives on the Sittingbourne Skate Park Steering Group to develop ambitious plans for a state-of-the-art skate park on the Lloyds Wharf site, as a way to encourage healthier levels of physical activity among residents and provide the Borough's young people with an amenity they can enjoy and be proud of.

The Council's role in the things listed by residents as most in need of improvement in the Borough (Table 1 above) is in most cases restricted to influencing or working in partnership with the responsible organisation to ensure that Swale's needs are given high priority. The Council is already experienced and effective in this collaborative approach to tackling local problems, and will be looking to enhance further its capacity for lobbying and influencing over the lifetime of this plan. Some of the ways in which the Council works to address residents' priorities as shown in Table 1 include:

- **Road and pavement repairs:** Although Swale Borough Council receives no funding for roads and has no statutory powers, it is an active member of the Joint Transportation Board, where it works to promote Swale's needs and ensure maintenance of Swale's roads is given a high priority within Kent.
- **Activities for teenagers:** The Council takes its responsibility for physical amenities in Swale very seriously, although children's and youth services in the Borough are run by Kent County Council. In addition to its work on the new skate park, the Borough Council is working hard with development partners to ensure that the new town centre for Sittingbourne, construction of which is scheduled to commence in 2015, will include a multiplex cinema and a range of other leisure facilities.
- **Job prospects:** The Council's Economy and Community Services team works to attract businesses into the Borough, support existing companies to grow, and improve opportunities for people to gain workplace skills. Since 2008, over two

million square feet of new employment floorspace has been created in Swale, almost twice that of any other Kent district, and last year almost 1,200 young people from Swale benefited from apprenticeship placements supported by the Council. The TIGER loan scheme has enabled over £6.9m of interest-free loans to be offered to local companies, supporting 433 new high-quality jobs in the Borough and helping safeguard a further 272.

- **Traffic congestion:** The Council is active in lobbying government for better road infrastructure to support economic growth in the Borough, with improvements to major highways of particular importance. Thanks largely to the Council's efforts, the Borough has recently been allocated £2.5m for town centre road improvements, and following significant local lobbying activity, the government has recently announced its commitment to improvements at Junction 5 of the M2.
- **Shopping facilities:** The regeneration of Sittingbourne town centre has long been a top priority for the Council. This is a complex piece of work involving a wide range of partners and finely judged assessments of what is viable given the town's geographic, economic and other characteristics. Having successfully steered negotiations through the difficult days of national economic recession, the Council and the Spirit of Sittingbourne consortium are now confident that construction work on Phase I will begin in 2015.

This plan outlines how the Council intends to carry on making Swale a better place over the period April 2015 to March 2018. It is organised under three overarching priority themes, intended to draw together the disparate strands of the Council's work to improve Swale as a place, as a community, and as an organisation. Some further examples of the Council's recent successes are given under each of the plan's three priority themes.

## **Priority Theme One: A Borough To Be Proud Of**

This priority theme focuses on the Council's aspirations for Swale as a physical place. The key outcomes we are working towards under this theme are:

- a redeveloped town centre for Sittingbourne which acts as a catalyst for the wholesale regeneration of the Town, fostering economic and cultural renewal;
- delivery of smaller-scale regeneration projects elsewhere in the Borough to improve the appearance and facilities of our towns and villages;
- a borough which is noticeably clean and well maintained, in which the natural and built environments are respected, conserved, and enhanced for future generations;
- a borough with a strong brand, which is recognised nationally and internationally for its advantageous business environment and for its wealth of visitor attractions; and
- world-class multi-modal transport links which facilitate economic growth and enable residents from across the Borough to take advantage of it.

This theme thus continues the 2007-2011 priority of 'Regenerating Swale' but updates it to focus on the delivery phase as we move towards construction work commencing. The theme also carries on much of what is covered by 'Open for Business' in the 2011-2014 plan, including physical economic enablers such as infrastructure, but also covering the need for the Borough to improve its 'brand recognition' to attract both investment and visitors. Finally, the theme continues many of the place-related elements of the 2007-2010 'Cleaner and Greener' and the 2011-2014 'Healthy Environment' priorities.

Given this continuity between past and present corporate plans, it is unsurprising that teams from across the Council are already working hard to ensure that Swale is a borough to be proud of. Over the past year, for example, the Council has:

- undertaken detailed preparatory work with the Spirit of Sittingbourne consortium so that a planning application for the first phase of the town centre regeneration, including a new cinema, multi-storey car-park, and leisure and restaurant facilities, is currently being determined, with work likely to begin on the ground this year;
- launched high-profile media and advertising campaigns against littering and dog-fouling, helping us ensure that Swale's streets remained clean and tidy;
- launched new 'Visit Swale' and 'Swale Means Business' websites to provide free promotion to the Borough's tourism businesses and showcase the many advantages of the Borough as a place for business investment;
- won numerous awards for the Borough's beaches and open spaces, as well as being shortlisted for a prestigious Municipal Journal award for the work of the Environmental Response Team.



In order to continue this work into 2015 and beyond, our high-level objectives under this priority theme, beneath which more detailed action plans are either already in existence or will be developed, are:

1. Deliver major regeneration projects
2. Enhance the Borough's economic and tourism offer
3. Keep Swale clean and tidy
4. Protect and improve the natural and built environments
5. Lobby for better roads and transport

## **Priority Theme Two: A Community To Be Proud Of**

This priority theme focuses on the Council's aspirations for the people of Swale. The key outcomes we are working towards under this theme are:

- communities across Swale in which people work together to solve the issues that confront their local areas;
- a diverse, flourishing and well-supported voluntary sector working to improve lives across the Borough;
- a low-crime Borough in which a 'zero tolerance' approach is taken to antisocial behaviour and no-one has to live in fear of crime, domestic abuse or intimidation;
- an educated community in which everyone has the opportunity to acquire the skills which will enable them to work to support their families, and in which businesses are able to thrive through the recruitment of well-qualified local people; and
- a community in which everyone plays their part in maintaining their own physical and mental wellbeing through healthy lifestyle choices, but where people have easy access to world-class healthcare when things go wrong.

This priority theme thus continues the emphasis placed on encouraging active communities in the 'Embracing Localism' priority of 2011-2014, and the 'Safer and Stronger' priority of 2007-2010. It seeks to recognise that the Council, and the wider public sector more generally, can never be the whole solution to the issues faced by communities in Swale, and that an important role for the Council is in enabling and empowering residents to find their own answers to the difficulties they want to overcome.

Strongly aligned to this, the theme also covers the people-focused elements of the 2011-2014 'Open for Business' priority, such as support for indigenous business growth and the need to bring the Council's influence to bear to improve residents' opportunities to acquire qualifications and skills. Finally, the theme recognises the significant contribution made by the Council's services to public health in the Borough, as well as its increasingly important role in working with partners to influence local healthcare provision.

Given this continuity between past and present corporate plans, it is unsurprising that teams from across the Council are already working hard to ensure that Swale is a community to be proud of. Over the past year, for example, the Council has:

- worked to support the Borough's employers to offer apprenticeship opportunities to local young people as a way to improve their skills and employability, so that Swale now out-performs much of Kent in the number of apprenticeships it can offer its young people;

- continued to transfer responsibility for the management of community assets such as community halls and sports and leisure facilities to groups of local volunteers with the passion and local knowledge to make the best use of them for the benefit of their communities;
- supported Isle of Sheppey residents to prepare for a changing climate through the Sustainable Sheppey project, increasing community resilience and helping people to adopt greener lifestyles, learn new skills, and save money on household bills;
- run a successful campaign to increase the number of people giving their time to help others in Swale, and organised the first ever Volunteer Swale Awards as a way to say “thank you” for the vital work they do to improve the lives of Swale’s residents.

In order to continue this work into 2015 and beyond, our high-level objectives under this priority theme, beneath which more detailed action plans are either already in existence or will be developed, are:

1. Foster economic growth and prosperity for all
2. Encourage active communities and support the voluntary sector
3. Reduce crime and disorder
4. Use our influence to ensure local skills are matched to local jobs
5. Work in partnership to improve health and mental health

## **Priority Theme Three: A Council To Be Proud Of**

This priority theme focuses on the Council's need to develop its own organisational capacity and culture as it continually reassesses how it can best achieve the objectives of the other two priority themes. The key outcomes we are working towards under this theme are to be:

- a Council which is regarded as a positive asset to the area by its residents and taxpayers, and which routinely exceeds its customers' expectations;
- an organisation which continually and actively seeks new ways of achieving better results at lower cost, and in which all employees are supported to experiment and innovate to improve the way they do their jobs;
- a Council whose ongoing financial viability is largely independent of the decisions made by central government, which is less dependent on grant funding, and which is well placed to secure the best arrangement for Swale's residents in the event of local government reorganisation; and
- a Council with the confidence and capacity to fulfil its community leadership role, sustaining effective partnerships with other local agencies and punching above its weight to ensure that Swale's needs are taken fully into account at a national and European level.

In part, this priority theme reaches back to the 2007-2010 priority of 'Becoming a High-Performing Organisation', but it acknowledges that the criteria for evaluating councils' performance have become more complex and more opaque in recent years. The theme also recognises the need to develop non-traditional sources of income while minimising expenditure by encouraging innovation and experimentation in delivering services. Thanks to its robust financial management practices, the Council will be able to make reserve funds available on an 'invest to save' basis for projects which offer realistic opportunities to make savings or generate revenue.

This priority theme additionally acknowledges the need for the Council to continue to be run as effectively and efficiently as possible, and to maintain a focus on residents' perceptions and customers' experiences. Finally, in incorporating an explicit objective to enhance the Council's capacity for achieving outcomes collaboratively (e.g. through lobbying, influencing or partnership working), the theme also seeks to deal as proactively as possible with the fact that some of the most significant aspirations for the Borough encompassed by the other two priority themes are simply not within the power of the Council to realise on its own.

Given the continuity between past and present corporate plans, it is unsurprising that teams from across the Council are already working hard to ensure that Swale's is a council to be proud of. Over the past year, for example, the Council has:

- frozen council tax for the fourth year in a row, maintaining Swale's position as the third-lowest of all Kent districts, notwithstanding its high proportion of properties in lower council tax bands;
- continued its prudent management of public finances, dealing positively with government spending reductions by setting a balanced revenue budget 18% smaller than three years ago and delivering an overall underspend against this at year end, further strengthening the council's ability to invest in long-term regeneration projects and earning an exemplary report from the Council's external auditor.
- supported a wide range of internal and partnership-based initiatives designed to cut costs and improve outcomes, including the 'troubled families' initiative, new service-sharing arrangements with Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells Councils, and co-location of housing and benefits advisors to provide a more seamless service to clients;
- made innovative use of new freedom from government red tape to invest reserves in the purchase of a house for use as temporary accommodation for local homeless households, enabling vulnerable people to remain in the Borough, close to their families and support networks, while saving taxpayers around £19,000 per year on the cost of bed-and-breakfast accommodation; and
- won numerous awards and accreditations, including corporate 'Investors in People' and 'Customer Service Excellence' in a number of customer-facing services, and ensured that three-quarters of the indicators we use to measure the quality of our services are performing better than an average local authority.

In order to continue this work into 2015 and beyond, our high-level objectives under this priority theme, beneath which more detailed action plans are either already in existence or will be developed, are:

1. Improve residents' perceptions and customers' experiences
2. Ensure that Swale's internal governance and decision-making are second to none
3. Encourage innovation at every level
4. Strengthen our financial and political resilience
5. Enhance our capacity for achieving outcomes collaboratively

# Financial Summary

[To follow]

## Your Councillors

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