

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge 2021/2 Position Statement



December 2021



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1. Welcome to Tonbridge and Malling

Welcome to Tonbridge and Malling. We are very proud of our borough – it's a great place to live, work and visit, and it boasts beautiful countryside, historic natural and built heritage and a well-performing economy. However, there are also some very real challenges that we are working hard to address with our partners.

The Borough Council last undertook a Corporate Peer Challenge in 2014, which acted as a catalyst for a number of positive changes within the authority. However, we believe that it is essential that local authorities such as ours continue to welcome external challenge as that is one of the fundamental ways in which we can continue to improve. With the Borough Council having a change in political leadership in recent months, now feels like the right time to undertake a further review in order to help put the council on solid foundations.

Given the current environment, the Borough Council would like this particular challenge to focus on the five core components only. Whilst the Borough Council has a corporate strategy and robust financial planning in place, in the current climate there is always a balance to be struck between our ambitions and our constraints, and we would very much welcome feedback about how we could achieve that in a sustainable manner.

We warmly welcome our LGA Peer Team to Tonbridge and Malling, and look forward to a fruitful working relationship. This Position Statement sets out both a comprehensive picture of our council and the borough we cover, which we hope acts as a useful starting point for the Peer Challenge process.



Cllr Matt Boughton
Leader of Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council



Julie Beilby
Chief Executive of Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council

2. Introduction to Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council

Why we want a Peer Challenge:

The Borough Council has seen first-hand, the tangible benefits of taking part in a Peer Challenge. In 2014, the Peer Challenge Team undertook a review of the Borough Council and were very quickly able to assess strengths and weaknesses and come to some very concise recommendations on future changes that could be made to address the challenges ahead. These recommendations have been embraced and thanks to the work of the Peer Challenge Team, the Borough Council is currently on a relatively stable footing given the current challenges it faces.

However, for a multitude of reasons, it now feels like the right time for the Borough Council to take part in a further Peer Challenge. Firstly, in July 2021, Cllr Matt Boughton became the new Leader of Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council following the resignation of Cllr Nicolas Heslop after 9 years as Leader. Cllr Boughton has also brought on board a new Cabinet, with Cllr David Lettington serving as Deputy Leader. With new political leadership at the Borough Council, there is an enthusiasm to bring in some external challenge to help influence and inform new priorities and plans.

Secondly, there have been a number of dramatic changes nationally since 2014 which means that the Borough Council has been (and will likely continue to be) operating within a very different environment. Both adjustments to a post-Brexit world and the considerable disruption caused by the covid-19 pandemic have led to a very challenging couple of years for the Council. It is therefore felt that the timing is right for a further independent assessment that takes stock of progress since the last challenge and helps to give feedback on progress on our priorities, plans and performance.

About the borough:

The Borough of Tonbridge and Malling is situated in the heart of Kent, covering an area of around 93 square miles from the North Downs at Wouldham and Snodland in the north to the town of Tonbridge in the south. It is largely rural with few large settlements, with Tonbridge in the south being the largest and home to around 40,000 residents. The remainder of the borough is dotted with villages and smaller towns.

It is a generally affluent borough, with comparatively low levels of unemployment and good household income levels. Mosaic profiling data from 2016 indicates that the most prevalent groups in Tonbridge and Malling are (Kent figures in brackets):

- Group B ('Prestige Positions' – established families in large, detached homes living upmarket lifestyles) – 17.6% (9.0%)
- Group D ('Domestic Success' – thriving families who are busy bringing up children and following careers) – 15.9% (10.1%)

- Group H – ('Aspiring Homemakers' – younger households settling down in housing priced within their means) - 14.6% (12.7%)
- Group M – ('Family Basics' – families with limited resources who have a budget to make ends meet) - 9.9% (8.8%)

The 2020 mid-year estimate indicates that the population of Tonbridge and Malling is approximately 132,600 people, with key characteristics of this population being:

- It has an average age of 40.7 years, which is slightly lower than the Kent average of 41.2 years.
- There are slightly more female residents (51.1%) than male.
- There is an overall population density of 5.5 persons per hectare (which is higher than the average of 4.5 for Kent as a whole)
- The borough is not particularly diverse in terms of ethnic backgrounds. The most recent data relates to the 2011 census which showed 92.4% of residents describing themselves as White British and 3.5% as another White ethnic group.

Whilst the borough performs well in comparison to the whole of Kent, it does still face a number of key challenges:

- **Ageing population:** Forecasts indicate that the population of Tonbridge and Malling is expected to grow to around 142,900 by 2028. The largest increase will be in people over 65 years of age – growing from 24,500 currently to around 30,000 by 2028 (an increase of roughly a quarter).
- **Pockets of deprivation:** Whilst Tonbridge and Malling borough is generally affluent, this does hide a number of pockets of deprivation within the borough. In the recent IMD2019 data, Trench (Tonbridge), East Malling and Aylesford all have Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) that fall within the 20% most deprived, with a further LSOA in Snodland falling within the 25% most deprived areas in England.
- **Housing delivery:** Our Housing Delivery Test Action Plan (July 2021) demonstrates that in the past 3 years, despite the constraints within the borough, 2,036 homes were delivered, which represents 91% of the Housing Delivery Test requirement of 2,240 homes. As this number has fallen below the 95% threshold, for the first time, the Borough Council is having to produce an Action Plan to identify actions that can help to boost supply. This is a challenge given the housing land supply currently stands at just under 3 years supply.
- **Housing affordability:** In 2020, Median house prices were 11.8 times more than median workplace earnings. To put this in to context, the median housing affordability ratio for England in 2020 was 7.84 and for the South East region it was 9.92.
- **Pressure on infrastructure:** there continues to be pressure on infrastructure as a result of housing growth. The Council's Infrastructure Delivery Plan (2018) highlights a number of short, medium and longer-term investments that are required in order to alleviate some of this pressure.

- **Skills attainment:** whilst the Borough is well-served by good quality education establishments, the skills attainment levels in the borough continue to be a challenge. For example, approximately 7% of the workforce (16–64-year-olds) do not have any qualifications, which is much higher than our West Kent neighbours

Table 1 provides a summary of some of the key statistics relating to Tonbridge and Malling borough:

Table 1: Summary of Key Data about the Borough		
	Tonbridge and Malling	Kent
Population (2020 est.)	132,600	1,589,100
Population Density (2020)	5.5 people per ha	4.5 people per ha
Proportion aged 19 and under (2020 est.)	25.0%	24.2%
Proportion aged 65 and over (2020 est.)	19.0%	20.2%
Average Age (2020)	40.7 years	41.2 years
Number of households (2020)	55,655	685,640
Area	92.71 square miles	1,368 square miles
Satisfaction with the area as a place to live (Happy at Home Index 2020)	Tonbridge 15 th (1 st in SE)	N/A
Halifax Quality of Life survey - UK Best Place to Live (2020)	14 th (5 th in SE)	N/A
Indices of Multiple Deprivation ranking out of 324 (where 1 is most deprived) (2019)	236	N/A
No of LSOAs (2019)		
- In 10% most deprived:	0/72	51/902
- In 20% most deprived:	3/72	132/902
Life Expectancy (2020)		
- Male	80.7 years	79.9 years
- Female	84.7 years	83.4 years
Average resident salary (full-time) (2020)	£689.90 per week	£607.10 per week
Average house price (2021)	£392,914	£362,758
Economically active 16–64-year-olds (2020)	81.4%	78.8%
Number of enterprises (2020)	6,055	64,005
Proportion of businesses that employ under 10 people (2020)	89.3%	90.2%
Top five sectors (by no. of businesses) (2021):		
	17.4%	14.9%

- Professional, Scientific and Technical	15.9%	15.4%
- Construction	10.8%	8.8%
- Business Administration	7.5%	6.3%
- Information and Communication	6.2%	9.0%
- Retail	5.2%	6.6%
- Accommodation and Food Services		

About the Council:

The political leadership of the Council is through the Executive (Cabinet), with managerial leadership comprising the Management Team.

Our Cabinet comprises the Leader of the Council along with 7 other councillors, each with a portfolio, as follows:

Cllr M Boughton – Leader of the Council

Cllr D Lettington – Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning and Infrastructure and Deputy Executive Leader

Cllr V Branson – Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration

Cllr R Betts – Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change

Cllr M Coffin – Cabinet Member for Finance, Innovation and Property

Cllr D Keers – Cabinet Member for Community Services

Cllr P Montague – Cabinet Member for Technical and Waste Services

Cllr K Tanner – Cabinet Member for Housing

Our Management Team comprises the Chief Executive and four Directors:

- Julie Beilby, Chief Executive
- Adrian Stanfield, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Central Services
- Sharon Shelton, Director of Finance and Transformation
- Robert Styles, Director of Street Scene, Leisure and Technical Services
- Eleanor Hoyle, Director of Planning, Housing and Environmental Health

Through its Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), the Council plans its finances over a 10-year horizon. At the time of drafting this document, the Council's estimated 'funding gap', translating into a need for financial savings, is in excess of £2 million. Due to the level of reserves it holds, the Council is in a position where it can afford to deliver the required savings over a more managed period of circa 4 years rather than needing to deliver immediately. Nevertheless, this is still a significant challenge, and the latest savings target is on top of the savings that have already been delivered (approaching £3.5 million) since the inception of the Savings and Transformation Strategy (STS). The Council is presently debt-free having sold its Housing stock in

the early 1990s. However, it is expected that the Council will need to borrow to meet the costs of new capital projects before the end of the MTFS period.

At the present time, on top of the general concerns nationally regarding recovery from the pandemic and responding to the climate crisis, the three biggest risk areas in terms of finances are waste, homelessness and local plan.

- **Waste Contract:** a joint contract with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council that is outsourced to Urbaser. The service has been beset by a number of challenges, particularly in relation to HGV driver recruitment, which has led to the suspension of the green waste collection service.
- **Temporary Accommodation:** the homelessness case load has continued to grow, and it is predicted that the estimated net increased cost in respect of temporary accommodation for 2021/22 will be in the region of £300,000.
- **Progress with the Local Plan:** In November 2021, the Local Plan submitted to the Secretary of State in January 2019 was withdrawn. The Council is now in the process of refreshing the Local Plan Evidence Base and preparing to undertake a new Call for Sites exercise, which invites landowners and those with an interest in land to promote sites for inclusion in the Local Plan. This work is expected to cost in the region of £650-750,000 over the next three years, with the new Plan scheduled to be submitted to the Secretary of State in the first half of 2023 and adoption expected during 2024.

The following table provides a summary of key data about the council:

Table 2: Summary of key data about TMBC	
Budget 2021/22 total service expenditure	£20,728,250
2021/22 gross expenditure budget	£91,970,466
2021/22 Council Tax average Band D charge	£219.50
Number of staff	255 (221 FTE)
Number of wards*	24
Number of Councillors*	54
Political Make Up (as of Dec 2021)	
- Conservative	37
- Liberal Democrat	9
- Green	4
- Independent	3
- Labour	1

*The Borough Council is currently subject to a Boundary Review by the LGBCE. They have proposed a reduction to 44 councillors across 19 wards.

3. Understanding of the Place and Priority Setting

In February 2020, the Borough Council launched a new Corporate Strategy, outlining its vision, values and priorities for the period 2020-2023. The direction of the strategy was informed by government expectations, local needs (as illustrated by socio-economic data), the views of partner organisations and the views of councillors and senior officers.

The Council's Vision reflects its role and purpose within the local community, and is designed to convey what the Council is striving to achieve through its work. This vision is:

“To continue to be a financially sustainable Council with strong leadership that delivers valued services, a commitment to delivering innovation and change to meet the needs of our Borough”

To underpin this vision, the Borough Council has a focus on the following four values and priorities:

- i) **Achieving Efficiency** - focusing on ensuring good value for money, continuously reviewing how our services are provided and funded, focusing our available resources where they will have most beneficial impact for our communities, and maximising commercial opportunities.
- ii) **Embracing Effective Partnership Working** - achieving more by working and engaging effectively with a wide range of local partners from the private, public, voluntary and community sectors.
- iii) **Valuing our Environment and Encouraging Sustainable Growth** - keeping our towns, villages and countryside clean and well maintained, planning for our future homes and jobs, led by our Local Plan, driving investment in economic regeneration and infrastructure and meeting the challenges of climate change.
- iv) **Innovation** – developing more cultural change, innovative and efficient ways to deliver our services through the use of improved systems and technologies guided by our recently adopted Digital Strategy.

Within a matter of weeks after this Corporate Strategy was adopted, the nation was faced with the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic. This clearly had an impact on our priorities in the short term, and as such the Borough Council produced a Year One Addendum to the Corporate Plan that reflected the need to provide a framework for working towards our own recovery in June 2020. The addendum was underpinned by three themes:

- Review - how did we respond to the pandemic emergency, and what have we learnt from this
- Re-orientation – how might we re-position the Council's finances and operations to be fit for purpose in the “new normal”

- Recovery – how to work with others to encourage recovery in our communities and economy, in adapting to both the transition period and into the “new normal”

These were considered on a thematic basis, loosely aligning with the KCC Recovery Plan, but amended to greater reflect the Borough Council’s roles and responsibilities within the recovery. This addendum was reviewed in June 2021.

With the immediate response to the coronavirus pandemic winding down, the impact that the pandemic has had on the Council and more widely across the borough, and with the arrival of a new Leader of the Council, emphasis is now on refreshing our Corporate Plan and establishing a framework that helps us to prioritise resources and deliver actions that benefit everyone living and working in the borough.

This process has already started with an initial consultation exercise with local residents which took place in October 2021. In total, there were 284 responses to the consultation, with the aggregate scores for all questions revealing the top five most important things for respondents are:

- A Council that listens
- Protection of the countryside
- Good facilities and infrastructure
- Parks and open spaces
- A reliable waste collection service.

Other issues that scored highly were keeping the borough safe, tackling fly-tipping and investing in town centres.

4. Leadership of Place

Partnership working across public sector bodies in Tonbridge and Malling is well-established and a collaborative approach is taken on a range of issues that are critical in addressing our challenges.

Tonbridge and Malling sits predominantly within a three-tier local authority structure (County, Borough and Parish), although the urban area of Tonbridge is unparished. In order to ensure effective and collaborative working across this structure, and with other key stakeholders, there are a number of established groups that are in place, including:

Kent-wide Partnerships

Kent Council Leaders is a high-level strategic group made up of the democratic Leaders of all Kent's local authorities, supported by their Chief Executives. Members of the group have signed up to the 'Kent Recommitment' and are working towards shared priorities, new initiatives and joint working - <http://www.kentcouncilleaders.org.uk/leaders/> . **Joint Kent Chiefs** is the strategic management group for Kent, which supports and underpins the Kent Council Leaders group - <http://www.kentcouncilleaders.org.uk/jointkentchiefs/> . The Borough Council has played a strong role in these two groups, which have been key in helping to address key strategic issues facing our borough and the county.

The **Kent Estates Partnership** was established in 2013 to support the delivery of the One Public Estate Programme. The partnership has 26 partners with representatives from Local Authorities, KALC, Health Partners, Kent Universities, Blue Light Services and Central Government. Since 2016, the partnership has been chaired by the Chief Executive of TMBC.

The **Kent & Medway Economic Partnership** was set up in 2013 and is an economic partnership which aims to drive forward economic growth and prosperity throughout the region. It is governed by a board that is chaired by the private sector, with membership drawn from business, local government, further and higher education. It is facilitated by Kent County Council and is one of four federated partnerships which comprise the **South East Local Enterprise Partnership**. The Borough Council has been a key member of this group, not only ensuring investment into the borough, for example securing Local Growth Funding for Tonbridge High Street, Leigh Flood Storage Area, NIAB East Malling Research, but also participating in joint lobbying and support for Kent as a whole.

Sub-regional Partnerships

The **West Kent Partnership** is a long-established public-private partnership that works towards improving the economy of West Kent – defined by the three local authority areas of Tonbridge and Malling, Tunbridge Wells and Sevenoaks. The partnership has successfully delivered a wide range of economic initiatives over the years, including the West Kent Enterprise Adviser Network,

West Kent LEADER Programme, West Kent Business Support Programme, and more recently the West Kent Kick Start Programme. Work is currently being undertaken to refresh the 'Case for West Kent', which will be used as a key tool in supporting the case for further investment into the area.

The **Medway Flood Partnership** is a hugely effective vehicle for the delivery of flood mitigation works across the River Medway Flood Plain. Administered and Chaired by the Environment Agency, the partnership also benefits from input from local authorities, parish councils, utilities providers and community and voluntary organisations. The Borough Council has taken a strong leadership role in the delivery of the Leigh Expansion and Hildenborough Enhancement Scheme, especially through political lobbying, accessing of external funding and the allocation of its own resources to ensure the scheme comes to fruition.

Borough-wide Partnerships

The **Tonbridge and Malling Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)** provides a strategic and co-ordinating umbrella for partnership working within the borough. It works to strengthen the connection between public sector agencies, local government, the voluntary and community sector, businesses and local residents. The aims and objectives of the LSP are to:

- exercise a strategic leadership role, co-ordinating services locally and securing improved outcomes for local people, including increasing the opportunities for joint service provision.
- promote or improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the borough, improving public services, developing strong, sustainable economies and healthy, safe communities.

The new Leader of Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council chairs the partnership meetings and is currently undertaking a review of the LSP, with consultation of members currently underway.

The **Tonbridge and Malling Community Safety Partnership (CSP)** works to tackle issues such as anti-social behaviour and crime, as well as support victims of domestic abuse. The Borough Council is the lead authority and works with a range of organisations including Kent Police, Kent Fire and Rescue Service, Kent County Council, West Kent Clinical Commissioning Group and local Housing Associations. The partnership meets on a weekly basis, chaired by the Council's Safer and Stronger Communities Manager, and are a vital tool in tackling anti-social behaviour, supporting vulnerable people and victims of crime, and sharing essential information between agencies to support safeguarding work. In addition, a Safeguarding Officer Study group meets on a regular basis to allow representatives from across Council services to discuss Serious Case reviews and any published Domestic Homicide reviews, along with any local safeguarding issues or internal staff training issues.

The **Joint Transportation Board** has a role to review the progress and out-turn of works programmes, review the performance of Kent Highway Services in the Borough and be a forum

for consultation between KCC and TMBC on policies, plans and strategies related to highways, road traffic and public transport. Recent topics of discussion have been the Tonbridge Town Wide 20mph Zone Trial and proposed traffic calming measures in Upper Haysden Lane. It is currently chaired by the Deputy Leader of TMBC.

In February 2021, the Borough Council established a **Climate Change Forum** to enable wider engagement on climate change issues, and to drive forward a response to the climate emergency and to support the delivery of the Climate Change Strategy Action Plan. This forum has a wide representation and is chaired by the Cabinet member for Environment and Climate Change.

Local Partnerships

The **Parish Partnership Panel** is a vehicle for the exchange of information, consultation and a structured dialogue between the Borough Council and the Parish Councils in the Borough. Recent topics of debate have included road safety, waste services and the Climate Change Strategy. The group has recently been subject to an Overview and Scrutiny Committee review in order to further improve the working relationship. This has led to a number of suggested changes, including the increased frequency of meetings and the removal of standing items.

In addition, to cover the unparished area of Tonbridge, the **Tonbridge Forum** has been established to create a separate vehicle for the exchange of information, consultation and a structured dialogue between the Borough Council and those Tonbridge-based organisations with a shared interest in enhancing the well-being of the town through the identification of problems and joint-working towards solutions. Like the Parish Partnership Panel, the Forum has also recently been reviewed. This has led to suggestions such as increasing community representation and ensuring greater two-way discussion on issues.

The Borough Council provides leadership, guidance and support to a range of **Community Partnerships and organisations** across the Borough. Borough Councillors are appointed to over 25 outside bodies each year, ranging from Age Concern to the Snodland Partnership. In addition, there are a number of groups that are co-ordinated and supported by officers, including:

- **Tonbridge and Malling Seniors (TAMS) Forum** – is an established group which seeks to represent the views of senior people in the borough aged 50 and over. The forum has a Management Committee which meets regularly to organise events and help promote the needs of older residents. Up until recently the forum was chaired by a Borough Councillor, but continues to be supported by the Council to help run the group, administer meetings and support the annual Seniors Information and Advice Day.
- **East Malling Partnership, Snodland Community Development Partnership (ME6)** and the **TN10 Partnership (in Trench, Tonbridge)** all aim to support residents by tackling issues of inequality in some of our most deprived wards. Each group is made up of voluntary and community sector representatives along with the Borough

Council (Councillors and Officers), local Housing Associations, Children's Centre and local school representatives. Work undertaken by these partnerships includes supporting food banks, information and advice days, jobs/career support, social activities, volunteering, physical and mental health support and community cohesion projects.

- **TM Youth Forum** – represents the views of young people aged 11 to 18 who live in Tonbridge and Malling. The forum has two types of membership – full member (attending meetings and events and get involved in projects and campaigns) and community member (consulted on projects and campaigns but not attend meetings).

5. Organisational Leadership and Governance

A considerable strength of the Council, over many years, has been the strong leadership given by both the Leader and Chief Executive, supported by constructive relationships between our Councillors and Officers, and the mutual respect which exists between the two. This relationship is underpinned by the Council's Constitution, which underpins the decision-making process and codes of conduct for both Councillors and officers.

Following the Local Government Act 2000 coming into effect, Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council adopted the 'Leader and Cabinet' model in 2002. This model currently consists of:

- a) Full Council of 54 Members which approves and adopts the budget and key policies within which Cabinet decisions are taken. Council appoints members of committees/Cabinet Advisory Boards and holds them and the Cabinet to account for the decisions they take.
- b) Cabinet which comprises 8 Members, including the Leader of the Council. They are responsible for most day-to-day decisions. Each Member has responsibility for particular service areas, as referenced in Section 2.
- c) Councillors' overriding duty is to the whole community, but they are democratically accountable to all the residents of their ward. Their role is to represent the residents of their ward, share in the policy and budgetary decisions of the Full Council, suggest policy improvements, and scrutinise the Cabinet's policy proposals and their implementation.

Management Team and Service Managers support the Cabinet and individual board members meet regularly with senior officers responsible for aspects of their portfolios.

In addition, under the terms of the Constitution, a number of regulatory and other Committees are in place. These have delegated authority to carry out and/or oversee specific duties and functions of the Council. These are:

- Planning Committees (Areas 1, 2 and 3)
- Audit Committee
- General Purposes Committee
- Joint Standards Committee
- Standards Hearing Panel
- Licensing and Appeals Committee
- Licensing and Appeals Panel
- Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Overview and Scrutiny Committee has a particularly important role within the Council's governance structure as it provides challenge to the Executive and Management Team helping to drive improvement. The committee very much acts as a 'critical friend' to the Council and can look at any area that is causing concern or is an important issue for local residents.

The Borough Council also operates a number of advisory boards which feed recommendations into Cabinet, and help it to develop and implement policy. The number of advisory boards has been streamlined over the past ten years to better reflect the priorities of the Council. At present there are 5 advisory boards covering the following topics:

- Communities and Housing
- Economic Regeneration
- Finance, Innovation and Property
- Planning and Transportation
- Street Scene and Environment

The advisory boards, which each have 16 non-executive councillors (politically balanced), cover a wide range of issues and ensure a local focus to the work of the Council.

There are many other opportunities for non-executive members to inform and influence decision-making. Councillors are welcome to attend and express their views at any meeting of the Cabinet, Advisory Boards, Overview and Scrutiny Committee or any other committee.

Induction training is given to all Members following local elections, including by-elections covering the array of Council Services. This is supplemented with training sessions taking place on a regular basis for all Councillors to help them to take an active role in discussions. A recent example of training provided for Councillors was a session on 'How to evidence our planning decisions' which took place in November 2021. Other recent sessions have included, 'risk management' and 'planning fundamentals'.

Our Strategic Risk Register is a 'live' document which is updated as often as required by the Management Team and reported in to Audit Committee for full consideration. In addition, a full risk analysis accompanies the budget proposals for the year ahead when being considered by Cabinet, and any new proposals (particularly significant corporate projects) are accompanied by a risk commentary as a matter of course.

There are many examples where the Council has shown strong leadership in recent years by making often difficult decisions that were required in order to support its residents. The following is an overview of a select sample:

Navigating the Council and the Borough through the pandemic - Vaccination Centre in Tonbridge - <https://www.tmbc.gov.uk/news/article/9/the-angel-centre-in-tonbridge-to-become-latest-large-scale-vaccination-centre-in-kent>

Moving towards a Special Expenses Scheme in 2016 that has created greater Council Tax fairness across the borough - <https://democracy.tmbc.gov.uk/documents/s28546/Annex%2014a%20Special%20Expenses%20Policy.pdf> – which has subsequently gone out to consultation again in recent months - <https://www.tmbc.gov.uk/news/article/17/consultation-opens-on-fairer-charging>

Transfer of operations at Leybourne Lakes Country Park to the Tonbridge and Malling Leisure Trust - <https://www.tmbc.gov.uk/news/article/34/award-winning-park-transfers-to-leisure-trust>

Securing the delivery of the Leigh Flood Storage Area Expansion following severe flooding in the borough in 2013/14 – the Borough Council not only allocated a funding contribution of £500,000, but has been central in lobbying the Local Enterprise Partnership, and accessing Local Growth Fund (LGF) funding - <https://www.tmbc.gov.uk/news/article/31/project-underway-to-protect-homes-from-future-flooding-in-tonbridge-and-hildenborough>

6. Capacity to Deliver

In this section, an overview is provided of both the staffing and financial capacity of the Borough Council in order to help provide a picture of its capacity to deliver.

Staffing Capacity:

The Borough Council has a relatively **small workforce of only 255 employees (221 FTE)**, many of whom are long-serving. The fact that the organisation is so small means that resources have to be carefully managed, and yet at the same time requires our existing workforce to be developed in ways that are responsive to future change and reflect the need to invest in the delivery of our key priorities.

Since the start of the pandemic, the authority's approach to HR strategic planning has, of necessity, been agile. The HR Strategy no longer exists as an annual planning event. Instead, the HR Manager attends the weekly meetings of Management Team to support 'real time' decisions regarding the ever-changing needs of the deployment and development of staff, as well as changes to the Council's permanent staffing establishment.

Where possible, members of Management Team submit draft reports on proposed temporary and permanent staffing issues which include financial information prepared by a member of the accountancy team. One of the key principles is that, in order to meet the requirements of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, any proposals should not entail growth unless absolutely necessary, and should only be funded from existing budgets or reserves. Management Team consider the extent to which the proposals address the needs of the Corporate Plan and where approval is given, authority to implement permanent establishment changes is sought from members of the General Purposes Committee in line with the Council's constitution. In urgent situations, prior approval to initiate recruitment for a post is sought from the Chair and Vice Chair of the General Purposes Committee.

The authority's main HR initiative at the current time is the trialling and development of more hybrid working arrangements to support the objective of the Climate Change Strategy to reduce carbon emissions; the Medium-Term Financial Strategy to seek to optimise the potential of the contribution of the eventual reduction in office space to achieve savings, as well as the need to ensure that significant numbers of employees remain well and are not absent at any one time due to sickness. This work is driven via a multi-disciplinary Officer Study Group whose recommendations are considered by Management Team and, where relevant Members at General Purposes Committee.

Staff Appraisals are undertaken on an annual basis both to assess individual performance and ensure that the delivery of our key priorities is given emphasis. Training needs are identified, and staff are given the opportunity to raise any capacity concerns with their line managers. Any issues that are identified are referred to Management Team. These annual appraisals are underpinned by regular one-to-one meetings between employees and their managers. The Council has a centralised training budget to ensure the Council can meet the professional development needs of staff for professional qualifications and continued professional development in all services across the Council.

All staff have access to the Council's online e-learning system, the number of online courses available to staff continues to grow year on year (currently over 200) as new courses are added to the online library, courses are regularly updated in line with changes in legislation. The Council also has a new E-Learning System provided by Learning Nexus due to launch in January 2022. Now that the Council has moved into the transitional working arrangements it is expected that staff will continue to work with a far greater degree of flexibility in terms of their work location. These new ways of working will likely mean that there is going to be a greater need for online training in the future with a reduction in face-to-face training. Management training has been identified as a priority to help managers manage their staff remotely now that they have teams which can consist of a mixture of remote, hybrid and roving workers as defined under the Council's transitional working arrangements. Courses for staff to help maximise their productivity under the new ways of working is also a priority.

Over the years, the Borough Council has sought to **deliver quality services** in the most efficient ways. For example, currently the Council's internal audit and counter-fraud function is delivered in partnership with Kent County Council, and whilst the Borough Council has an Economic Regeneration team, a number of aspects of the Economic Regeneration agenda (chiefly rural regeneration, skills development, worklessness and business support) are delivered through the West Kent Partnership, which covers the local authority areas of Tonbridge and Malling, Tunbridge Wells and Sevenoaks – www.westkentpartnership.org.uk

In addition, the Council constantly **reviews** shared arrangements to ensure they continue to deliver value for money. Up until recently the Borough Council shared a Building Control service with Sevenoaks District Council, however this has now ended, culminating in a saving of approximately £25,000 per annum.

The Council also has a strong track record of harnessing community **volunteering** to help deliver local priorities. In addition to the community partnership referred to in Section 4, the waste and recycling team work closely with the local community to tidy-up their neighbourhoods. This includes providing groups, schools and residents with all the equipment they need to run a clear-up operation.

Financial Capacity:

As mentioned in Section 7, our external auditors provide an annual assessment of our financial management and value for money, and our insurers undertake period risk management assessments into specific areas.

The Council maximises the value of Section 106 contributions from developers for a range of local improvements, including public open space and sports and recreation facilities. In the Infrastructure Funding Statement (December 2020), a summary of obligation secured by s.106 during 2019/20 is provided, which highlights that in addition to 188 affordable housing units being secured and 134 school places being facilitated, £385,776 was secured for the provision or enhancement of medical practices, and £266,480 was secured for public open space provision. Through this resource, a range of projects have been (part) funded including improvements to the public realm and linkages across Tonbridge Town Centre (including a new bridge at Tonbridge Racecourse Sportsground), the purchase of new temporary accommodation, and a new café/water sports area at Leybourne Lakes Country Park, which will open in Summer 2022.

More recently, the Borough Council has just secured significant s.106 contributions from the new Panattoni Park Aylesford development, which is scheduled to complete in 2023 and will support improvements to sustainable transport and biodiversity initiatives.

In addition, the Council also has a strong track record of bringing in external funding into the borough in order to enable delivery. For example, Business Rates Retention Pilot and Business Rates Pool funding are both being put to good use to fund the economic regeneration agenda, support the development of the Local Plan and carry out improvements at Tonbridge Castle. The Council has also successfully helped to secure Local Growth Fund grant funding for a wide range of important infrastructure projects in the borough, including:

- Tonbridge High Street Improvements
- Junction 4 M20 Upgrade
- Leigh Flood Storage Area and Hildenborough Embankment
- East Malling Advanced Technology Horticultural Zone
- West Kent Sustainable Transport Programme – improvements to Snodland and Tonbridge Stations.

In addition, the inclusion of Borough Green Gardens within the Garden Communities Programme has opened the door to additional resources that support the progression of the site.

7. Financial Planning and Viability

The Borough Council has a proven track record of managing its finances to ensure financial sustainability, which is a key strength in the organisation at a time of uncertainty regarding government funding, challenges in relation to the waste contract, Local Plan and the response to climate change, as well as disruption caused by the covid-19 pandemic, which combined add up to a significant financial challenge.

The financial environment that the Borough Council works within, including the key risks, can be found in our Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). This enables the Borough Council to take a measured and controlled approach to budgetary pressures rather than a knee-jerk reaction. Our external auditor (Grant Thornton UK LLP) concluded, following the 2020 audit, that in all significant respects the Council put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources for the year ending 31 March 2020.

Since it was introduced in 2003, the MTFS has been key in protecting the key services that are provided by the Council. However, as a result of the unprecedented impact of the pandemic, along with matters referred to above, there are now significant savings required by April 2026 in order to preserve the integrity of our financial plans. Indeed, it has never been more important for the Council to focus firmly on the delivery of necessary savings.

A recent update report to Cabinet on the MTFS (October 2021) has set this out clearly. The funding gap (representing savings that have yet to be identified and delivered over the course of the strategy) has increased to **over £2 million**. This is a daunting funding gap but one that has been broken down into 5 tranches in order to ensure the savings are met within the timeframe:

Tranche 1 - £100,000 to be achieved by April 2022

Tranche 2 - £350,000 to be achieved by April 2023

Tranche 3 - £400,000 to be achieved by April 2024

Tranche 4 - £650,000 to be delivered by April 2025

Tranche 5 - £650,000 to be delivered by April 2026.

In order to deliver the required savings, the Council has developed a Savings and Transformation Strategy (STS). This strategy sets out a measured structure and framework for delivering the necessary savings and transformation contributions through a series of 'themes'. Each theme has a deliverable target within a timeframe, although it does not itemise exactly how each theme will meet its target – this is being undertaken in more detail by the relevant Directors and Service Managers, in discussion with portfolio-holders.

Recognising the urgency of the situation and that 'business as usual' is not an option, discussions regarding the prioritisation of services is currently underway between Cabinet and Management Team. Significant progress has already been made on getting towards the target set out in Tranche 1, with work underway to identify the savings required in Tranches 2-5.

8. Area of Focus for the Challenge

Whilst in our previous Corporate Peer Challenge in 2014, the Borough Council requested that the topic of 'economic regeneration' be an area of focus, on this occasion it is felt that the direction of this particular challenge should remain focussed on the five core elements:

- Local priorities and outcomes
- Organisational and place leadership
- Governance and culture
- Financial planning and management
- Capacity for improvement.

The reasons for this are that, firstly, the recommendations of the previous challenge regarding the economic regeneration agenda have been delivered and it is now a well-established part of the Council. Secondly, given the fundamental obstacles that the council faces it is imperative that there is a concerted focus on the overall DNA of the organisation in order to ensure that, corporately, it is able to manage and work through what is proving to be an extremely challenging period in Local Government, and benefit from the advice and guidance of the Peer Challenge Team.

9. Sharing of Successful Practice

This section contains a number of examples of successful practice that we think will be of help to other councils. We would be happy for these to be shared with other councils through their corporate peer challenges and the LGA innovative councils database.

New Approach to Making the Council more Accessible

The Borough Council has made a strategic decision to make digital the default means of accessing council services and support in order to improve efficiency and effectiveness. One of the key challenges in meeting this objective was that our existing website was not sufficiently set-up to provide a straightforward digital experience. The site had evolved over a number of years to become cumbersome and difficult to navigate.

Following feedback from local residents, the Borough Council went about the task of transforming the website, with a range of much improved features. For more information go to <https://www.tmbc.gov.uk/news/article/20/new-website-to-offer-better-digital-services>

New Working Arrangements

As part of the Council's Brexit resilience measures, the Council moved from a static, desk-based model to flexible working arrangements that enabled staff to work remotely or in a hybrid environment. This new set-up enabled the Council to operate efficiently and quickly as the covid-19 pandemic evolved, and ensured a strong continuity in public service provision.

In recent months, the arrangements have evolved further as the Council has moved to a predominantly cloud-based solution which has not only increased resilience but also delivered cost efficiencies.

Covid Response and Recovery

Whilst the above measures have undoubtedly enhanced the Borough Council's resilience and continuity during the coronavirus pandemic, the Borough Council has also undertaken a considerable amount of work to ensure that local residents and businesses were as well-protected as possible. Measures included:

- Close collaboration between Finance, Business Rates and Economic Regeneration to ensure the effective distribution of just under £40m of business grants between April 2020 and October 2021. Discretionary funding was aligned with mandatory funding to ensure consistency of approach.
- Support for the establishment of a county-wide business support helpline to ensure easy access to help for businesses in the borough. This was set up at a time (March 2020) when the national helpline had insufficient capacity to meet demand. Take up in the borough was high, with nearly 2,000 enquiries from Tonbridge & Malling businesses for the period up until October 2021.

- The setting up of a special community support helpline to provide supplies to residents who are socially isolated or in urgent need of help. In order to ensure effective use of resources, the Council employed Civil Enforcement Officers to help provide these food supplies to older and vulnerable residents across the borough, with over 150 distributed in the first couple of months of the pandemic alone.

Christmas 2021 – Festival and Castlemas

The Borough Council has a strong track record when it comes to events as a means of enhancing the economic vitality of our towns – be it helping to facilitate community events, ensuring safety and compliance or direct delivery. For Christmas 2021, the Borough Council worked closely with the Tonbridge Rotary to support the Christmas Festival and lights switch on 28 November 2021, which saw approximately 12,000 people visit over the course of the event. The Council also used Welcome Back Funding to support the delivery of a brand-new event ‘Castlemas’ at Tonbridge Castle which ran from 10-19 December 2021 and comprised a range of daytime and evening entertainment. It has received a lot of positive reviews including - <https://www.kentlive.news/whats-on/reviews/visited-tonbridge-castlemas-opening-day-6336802>

Green Business Grants Scheme

The Borough Council established a new Green Business Grants Scheme in July 2021 in order to help contribute towards the aims and objectives of the Climate Change Strategy and the Economic Recovery Strategy. The scheme is focussed on supporting growth in our local green business sector, but also interventions that help to reduce the carbon footprint of our businesses across the borough. It has been pitched to add value to the Kent-wide Lower carbon Across the South East (LoCASE) scheme. A first round closed in September 2021, with 19 proposals allocated funding amounting to just over £75,000. A second round will open up in early 2022.

Since the scheme has been established, three other local authorities in the South East have approached the Council about the scheme with a view to using the template of the project for their own areas.

Aylesford Jobs Market

In recent years, the Borough Council has led the delivery of a jobs event in Aylesford. The creation of this event has been in response to socio-economic deprivation data highlighting the need for additional support in this part of the borough. By working in partnership with the DWP, the Royal British Legion Industries (RBLI) and local Registered Social Landlords, the event has now become an established event in the calendar.

Despite a short hiatus due to the covid-19 pandemic, the jobs market took place again in October 2021. 25 local businesses and training providers, all looking to recruit new staff or students, took part in the event, with just over 100 local people attending. On this occasion, numbers were about half of pre-pandemic levels due to venue capacity constraints, but the feedback from all concerned has been overwhelmingly positive.

10. Key Documents

Document	Link
Annual Audit Letter – December 2020	https://democracy.tmbc.gov.uk/documents/s51191/Annex%201%20-%20Letter.pdf
Budget Book and Budget Summary Table 2021/22	https://www.tmbc.gov.uk/downloads/download/107/tmbc-budget-2021-22 https://www.tmbc.gov.uk/downloads/download/106/budget-summary-2021-22
Climate Change Strategy 2020-2030	https://www.tmbc.gov.uk/downloads/file/1793/tmbc-climate-change-strategy
Climate Change Strategy Second Year Action Plan	https://www.tmbc.gov.uk/downloads/file/1345/tmbc-climate-change-action-plan-2021
Corporate Strategy 2020-2023	https://www.tmbc.gov.uk/downloads/file/1767/corporate-strategy-2020-to-2023
Corporate Strategy First Year Addendum	https://democracy.tmbc.gov.uk/documents/s55240/Appendix%201_Corporate%20Plan_Addendum_Update.pdf
Digital Strategy 2019-2023	https://democracy.tmbc.gov.uk/documents/s39048/Digital%20Strategy.pdf
Economic Recovery Strategy 2021-2023	https://www.tmbc.gov.uk/downloads/file/1328/economic-recovery-strategy-2021-2023
Medium Term Financial Strategy	The latest version is not on the website yet as it is dynamic. The last published version is in the budget book referenced above which was approved by Full Council in Feb 2021 (page 9 – 13). Cabinet on 12 October 2021 updated the MTFs, and it has further moved since.
Saving and Transformation Strategy	The latest version is not on the website yet as it is dynamic. The last published version is in the budget book referenced above which was approved by Full Council in Feb 2021 (page 14 - 16).
Statement of Accounts	https://www.tmbc.gov.uk/downloads/file/1856/tonbridge-and-malling-borough-council-statement-of-accounts-2021
Strategic Risk Register	Reported to the Audit Committee – last update was 27 September 2021 - https://democracy.tmbc.gov.uk/documents/s56637/Annex%201.pdf . Next update will be January 2022.