

Economic Development Strategy 2023-2027



Dynamic – Resilient – Inclusive - Sustainable

July 2023

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01 Foreword

Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council recognises the leading role it can play in helping to drive forward sustainable economic growth, and shape the borough into a place that offers a high quality of life for residents, businesses and visitors alike.

This is a responsibility that we take on with enthusiasm, but it is by no means a small undertaking in the current economic climate. The COVID-19 pandemic has left a considerable legacy, with the sizeable impact on economic and personal well-being resulting in changes in the way many people live their lives and how businesses continue to operate.

At the same time there is a growing imperative for action in mitigating the worst effects of climate change – making sure that the council leads by example, but also supporting the local business community to move towards carbon net zero.

These are challenging times, but it is vital that the council proactively uses the resources at its disposal to help steer our economy towards a prosperous, inclusive and sustainable future. Our Economic Development Strategy 2023-2027 sets out how, with our partners, we aim to achieve this.



Cllr Robin Betts

Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Regeneration and Property

July 2023

02 Strategic Context

The council is in the process of adopting a new Corporate Strategy 2023-2027 which sets out a bold new vision for the borough:

“To be an innovative and forward-thinking council, that leads the people and businesses of the borough towards a vibrant, prosperous and sustainable future.”

One of the priorities that underpins the vision focusses specifically on the local economy and the role that the council and its partners can play in supporting it. The priority, which emphasises the need for sustainable growth, is:

“Investing in our local economy to help support residents and businesses and foster sustainable growth.”

These statements provide a strong starting point for the direction that this strategy needs to take.

When the council’s last economic strategy was produced in 2020/21 (Economic Recovery Strategy 2021-23), the emphasis was very much on navigating through the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a number of key considerations now need to be factored into our thinking when formulating our new strategy document and identifying our priorities. These include:

- The economic uncertainty arising from high inflation, tight labour markets and supply chain disruption, as well as the longer-term impact and opportunities arising from Brexit.
- Moving towards a net zero carbon economy in a way that incentivises the use of new technologies and green skills development as well as the enhancement of our natural environment.
- The need to align this economic strategy closely with the re-positioning of the West Kent Partnership and its new priorities, the Kent & Medway Economic Development Strategy and our UK Shared Prosperity Fund Investment Plan in order to support our local economy effectively.
- Gross Value Added (GVA) per head data has highlighted the strong role that West Kent plays in contributing towards the Kent economy – for example in Tonbridge and Malling the GVA per head is £36,690 compared to £27,907 across Kent as a whole. However, when compared to other locations equidistant to London, such as Guildford, it is clear that there is room for improvement.
- The challenge for our High Streets as they evolve from purely ‘shopping centres’ to provide a wider array of services.
- Supporting the rural economy as it undergoes a period of change, particularly with the switch away from the Direct Payment system in the farming sector and changes in the labour market.

03 Key Strengths & Challenges

Like any borough, Tonbridge and Malling has numerous strengths and challenges that have an impact on its potential for success. In addition to being well located with good transport links, the borough also has a strong business community, and an attractive environment.

However, many of these strengths also bring challenges. For example, for much of the borough development is constrained due to environmental and landscape designations (such as the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the Green Belt), and whilst proximity to London and good accessibility to international gateways brings wealth into the area, it also contributes to higher housing prices, greater employment costs and congestion.

Strengths:	Challenges:
Location – proximity to London and to international gateways	Identifying new employment sites to meet future need.
Good strategic transport network – good road and rail links that enable high levels of accessibility.	Loss of existing commercial premises through Permitted Development Rights.
An attractive environment that creates a high quality of life.	Limited Higher Education provision in the borough. Recruitment challenges for local businesses.
A strong business community with a diverse number of key sectors that ensure local resilience.	Housing price affordability.
A proactive and well-run local authority, with a strong partnership network.	Transport infrastructure often congested at peak times.
Comparatively low level of unemployment amongst the local work force.	Rural isolation – especially with local public transport services reduced and some areas of variable broadband coverage.
	Ineligibility for many public funding opportunities due to perceived affluence.

04 Vision & Strategic Priorities

“Maximising the unique strengths of the local area to help create a resilient, dynamic and inclusive economy that fosters sustainable growth.”

During the early 2020s, the local economy has been impacted by a series of national and global events. We have worked closely with local businesses to ensure that we have managed to avoid the very worst impacts of these events, and it has demonstrated that we are fortunate to have a **resilient** and **dynamic** business community. This is something that we need to build upon in order to provide greater protection against any future challenges.

We also need to ensure that everyone sees the benefit of improvements in our economy, and that no-one is left behind. By being **inclusive** in our approach, we can help to increase skills levels and reduce unemployment through helping to create local opportunities.

Reducing our own carbon footprint, and encouraging others to do the same, is a central part of our Climate Change Strategy. In line with the aims and objectives of this strategy, we need to ensure that this Economic Development Strategy has a strong focus on **sustainable growth** that can reap benefits for our businesses and positively impact future generations.

With these key elements to our vision in mind, 7 themes have been identified that make up our approach in this strategy:

Theme 1: Promoting the borough:

Tonbridge and Malling borough has lots of great things to shout about, and a wide range of successful businesses across a number of sectors. By promoting the area, as part of a wider West Kent initiative, it will help to increase investment, attract visitors and help to foster a stronger identity that will help to support our business community.

Theme 2: Supporting local business:

Starting or growing a business is no easy task with just under 40% of businesses failing to last three years and nearly 90% of businesses in the borough being classed as ‘micro’. The council and partner organisations can offer areas of support to business, such as establishing advice and mentoring programmes, providing grant support and running events that support networking opportunities or enable businesses to find new members of staff.

Theme 3: Land and premises (and supporting infrastructure):

The adoption of a Local Plan that identifies new employment sites is key to ensuring that existing businesses and inward investors have the room to grow and are supported, where required, in that journey. There are also a number of strategic investment sites in the borough that are vital to the strengthening of the local economy, and it is therefore important that the council engages fully with these to ensure that they are delivered in a timely fashion and offer the maximum benefit locally.

Theme 4: A greener more productive economy:

Whilst growth is clearly important, it is essential that the economy de-carbonises in order to reduce its impact on the environment and mitigates against the worst impacts of climate change. A growing economy can be a green economy: between 1990 and 2019 the UK reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 41% while the economy grew by 78%. Many businesses are well-advanced on their journey towards Net Zero, reaping the benefits of greater efficiencies and shielding themselves from the volatility of the energy markets, but others still need support along the way. There are also new challenges such as making sure that there are sufficient skills locally to enable the decarbonisation of the economy and our homes, and the support infrastructure is available to enable growth in the use of electric vehicles.

Theme 5: A thriving rural economy:

The borough is mainly rural in nature, and as such our rural businesses play a strong part in the overall performance of our local economy. As well as fantastic land-based businesses, institutions such as East Malling Research Station (NIAB EMR) and Hadlow College (part of North Kent College), there are a diverse range of innovative rural businesses covering a range of sectors. With recruitment challenges and the loss of some funding sources, it is important that we offer support to contribute towards a flourishing rural economy.

Theme 6: An inclusive economy

Despite Tonbridge and Malling being perceived as affluent, not everyone enjoys equal access to opportunities. This is best illustrated by the variation in unemployment rates and deprivation indices across the borough. We will collaborate with local schools, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Kent County Council and community organisations to create opportunities that contribute towards a more inclusive society.

Theme 7: Vibrant town centres

High streets are the beating hearts of our towns, and in recent years they have had to deal not only with the impact of economic downturns and the covid-19 pandemic, but also the shift in spending behaviour as online retailing expands. We will support our town centres as they adapt to change, to ensure they are attractive places to socialise, shop and be entertained.

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05 Working in Partnership

The Borough Council recognises the key role it has to play in helping the local economy to recover and grow, both in terms of setting a strategic framework for its approach as well as through the various initiatives it undertaken order to contribute towards the creation of a better economy.

However, our positive impact can only really be maximised by working with partners that also play an equally important role and can offer specialist skills, experience, knowledge and additional resources. As such, we are committed to working with partners organisations to achieve the actions set out in this strategy. Key individual partners are too numerous to include individually in this chapter, but the following partnerships will be essential in supporting the council to meet the needs of the local economy:

UK Shared Prosperity Fund Partnership (UKSPF): the council is working closely with Central Government and local organisations to deliver its Levelling Up Programme. An important part of the delivery of this programme is the role of a 'Local Group' comprising community and business representatives, which provides oversight, advice and support in advancing UKSPF funded initiatives.

Kent and Medway Economic Partnership (KMEP): is currently one of the four federated partnerships which comprises the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP). KMEP is focussed on driving forward economic growth and prosperity in Kent and Medway and is governed by a Board with membership drawn from business, local government and education establishments. KMEP delivers the objectives set out in Kent and Medway's Growth Plan, and in recent year has supported the borough in securing investment through government initiatives such as the Local Growth Fund and Growing Places Fund.

West Kent Partnership (WKP): is the strategic economic partnership covering the local authority areas of Tonbridge and Malling, Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells. The three areas work closely together to leverage the resources available to them in order to deliver more for our local businesses and promote the local economy.

Over recent years, the partnership has successfully delivered initiatives including:

- the West Kent Enterprise Adviser Network, which had a focus on business-relevant careers advice for schools;
- the West Kent Kick Start Programme, giving young people 6-month work placement opportunities;
- the West Kent Jobs Fairs and West Kent SkillsFest.

There are plenty of exciting new initiatives starting, including the West Kent Business Support Programme, West Kent Rural England Prosperity Fund (grants for rural businesses and communities), and the Invest West Kent initiative to promote the area as a great place to do business.

In addition, there are a number of key partners that the Borough Council works with directly to deliver initiatives or to support work in a specific area of the local economy. A list of these partners, along with some of the key funding streams, is provided in Appendix 1.

06 Action Plan

Theme	Action	Measure	Partners
Promoting the Borough	Rebranding of the West Kent Partnership. Launch of Invest West Kent website and associated campaigns.	Delivery of brand and launch of website by Autumn 2023. Ongoing campaigns.	West Kent Partnership (Sevenoaks District Council and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council)
Promoting the Borough	Delivery of Service Level Agreement with Visit Kent to promote the area as a tourism destination.	100% of targets in the SLA met.	Visit Kent
Supporting Local Business	Delivery of the West Kent Business Support Programme (UKSPF)	20 Tonbridge and Malling based businesses per annum given mentoring support and access to micro-grant support. Delivery of minimum 6 workshops across West Kent per annum	West Kent Partnership (Sevenoaks District Council and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council), Smarter Society Ltd
Supporting Local Business	Promote the Kent and Medway Growth Hub and other business support organisations.	To promote the support available and appropriately refer businesses.	Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce, other business representative organisations.
Supporting Local Business	Local Business Networking	Minimum of 3 events per annum.	Federation of Small Business (FSB); Tonbridge Town Team; Town and Parish Councils
Supporting Local Business	Creation and Distribution of the monthly Business Bulletin.	Minimum 12 bulletins per annum Minimum 900 recipients on the business database.	Input from all partner organisations and businesses.
Supporting Local Business	Annual West Kent Business Conference	Delivery of one summit per annum with minimum 40 businesses attending.	West Kent Partnership (Sevenoaks District Council and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council)
Land and Premises	Delivery of the Tonbridge and Malling Local Plan by the Local Planning Authority	Work towards the adoption of the Local Plan and the allocation of strategic sites and new employment allocations by 2026.	Statutory Consultees, local residents and businesses.
Land and Premises	Work with Panattoni to help complete the Panattoni Park Aylesford development.	Full occupation of the site by 2024.	Panattoni, Kent County Council

Theme	Action	Measure	Partners
Land and Premises	Work with NIAB EMR to bring forward further phases of the Green Tech Hub for Advanced Horticulture.	Implementation of Phase 2 during the course of this strategy.	NIAB EMR, East Malling Trust.
Land and Premises	Support the Royal British Legion Industries in bringing forward the next phase of the Centenary Village and other on-site developments	Implementation of works during the course of this strategy.	RBLI
Land and Premises	Support the delivery of the Leigh Expansion and Hildenborough Embankment Scheme (LEHES)	Works fully completed by 2025.	Environment Agency, Kent County Council, SE Local Enterprise Partnership
Land and Premises	Promote Locate in Kent to businesses looking for land or premises to grow.	To promote the support available and appropriately refer businesses.	Locate in Kent
A Greener More Productive Economy	Green Business Grant Scheme (UKSPF)	Deliver 2 more rounds of the GBGS (in 2023 and 2024) supporting a minimum 20 businesses.	Sevenoaks District Council, Kent County Council (LoCASE); Local Businesses.
A Greener More Productive Economy	Delivery of Green Retrofit Skills Pilot (UKSPF)	Support up to 50 people into gaining green retrofit skills in 2024/25.	Sevenoaks District Council, Local Colleges
A Greener More Productive Economy	Carbon Literacy Training (UKSPF)	Delivery of Carbon Literacy Training to up to 100 people in 2024/25	Town and Parish Councils, Charitable and Community Groups
A Greener More Productive Economy	Promote existing advice on energy efficiency and emissions reduction to local businesses	To promote the support available and appropriately refer businesses.	Low Carbon Kent, LoCASE, GSE Net Zero Hub.
A Greener More Productive Economy	Support provision of Electric Charging Points	50 Electric Charging Points delivered in Phase 2 of the Programme (by April 2025)	Kent County Council, Connected Kerb
A Thriving Rural Economy	West Kent Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) Programme	A minimum of 25 grants provided to support rural businesses and communities during 2023-2025	West Kent Partnership
A Thriving Rural Economy	Promote and refer local businesses to the Growing Kent and Medway initiative	To promote the support available and appropriately refer businesses.	NIAB EMR (at East Malling), Growing Kent and Medway partners.
An Inclusive Economy	Delivery of jobs fairs that support people into work or training.	2 per annum (Tonbridge and Aylesford (RBLI Village))	Department for Work and Pensions; Housing Associations, RBLI

Theme	Action	Measure	Partners
An Inclusive Economy	Support apprenticeship and internship opportunities for people with SEN.	Work with specialist college to support up to 8 young people into workplace opportunities.	Oaks Specialist College, Education People (KCC)
An Inclusive Economy	Support local schools with careers advice and work experience.	Attend up to 2 school careers fairs per annum.	T&M Schools, The Education People, Kent Education Business Partnership.
An Inclusive Economy	Help to reduce digital exclusion in our most deprived communities.	Establish an initiative to help tackle Digital Exclusion	Kent County Council
Vibrant Town Centres	Shopfront and Vacant Unit Improvement Scheme (BRRP/UKSPF)	Support up to 35 shopkeepers with grant support and advice during 2023-2025	Let's Do Business Group, local businesses.
Vibrant Town Centres	Programme of Town Centre Events and Markets	Deliver and support a minimum of 30 events per annum to support our town centres.	Events Companies and organisers, local businesses.
Vibrant Town Centres	Tonbridge Town Centre Review	Production and implementation of sustainable plans for the regeneration of Tonbridge Town Centre.	Key Landowners, MACE Consultants
Vibrant Town Centres	Improve wayfinding and signage in Tonbridge Town Centre (UKSPF)	Delivery of first phase to improve links between Tonbridge Station and the rest of the town centre.	Community Rail Partnership, Network Rail, Southeastern, local residents and businesses
Vibrant Town Centres	Explore potential of a BID in Tonbridge.	Carry out initial research to examine the viability of a BID in Tonbridge.	Tonbridge Town Team, local businesses

07 Economic Dashboard

This economic dashboard provides a very high-level illustration of the performance of the local economy. Whilst there is some delay in the data, it does display that many aspects of the economy have plateaued, with ‘business failures’, youth unemployment and skills attainment on a negative trajectory.

The aspiration for 2027 is set out in the end column. Obviously, this can be impacted by a number of factors that are outside the control of this authority, however through the initiatives set out in the action plan the strategy does have the potential to help move all of these indicators in a positive direction.

Along with the action plan, updates on this dashboard will be provided on an annual basis, with comparison data also being provided in order to benchmark the performance of the local economy.

	Economic Indicator	Latest Data	Date	Current Trend	Aspiration for 2027
Dynamic	VAT Registrations (Start-Ups)	750	2021		800 per annum
Dynamic	Job Density	0.98	2021		1
Resilient	VAT De-registrations	775	2021		650 per annum
Resilient	3 Year Business Survival Rates (%)	62.5	2021		65%
Resilient	Median Gross Weekly Full-time Earnings (£) by Residence	£703.60	2022		£750
Resilient	Median Gross Weekly Full-time Earnings (£) by Workplace	£608.80	2022		£650
Inclusive	Unemployment Rate (%)	2.2%	Apr 2023		Less than 2%
Inclusive	16–64-year-olds claiming out of work benefits (%)	3.6%	Apr 2023		Less than 3%
Inclusive	National Vocational Qualification Level 3+ (%)	48.3%	2021		60%
Inclusive	Happiness Score (out of 10)	7.6	2022		8 out of 10
Sustainable	Greenhouse Gas emissions from industry and commercial sectors in T&M (tCO2e)	188	2020		150
Sustainable	Percentage of T&M Greenhouse Gas emissions from industry and commercial sectors (%)	25	2020		20%
Sustainable	No. of renewable electricity installations	1,848	2021		2,750
Sustainable	% of all dwellings with EPC band C and above (%)	48.95	2022		55%
Sustainable	Proportion of employment in energy intensive sectors (%).	36	2022		30%

Appendix 1:

Partners
Community Rail Partnerships
Clarion Housing
Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS)
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)
Department for International Trade (DIT)
Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC)
Deskrenters (Castle Lodge)
East Malling Trust
Education Business Partnership Kent
Environment Agency
Federation of Small Businesses
Golding Homes
Highways England
Homes England
JobCentre Plus
Kent Apprenticeships
Kent County Council
Kent Farmers Market Association
Kent International Business
Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce
Locate in Kent
Mid Kent College
Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce
Network Rail/Great British Railways
NIAB East Malling Research
North Kent College
Orbit Group
Produced in Kent
Royal British Legion Industries
Southeastern Railways
The Education People
The National Trust (Ightham Mote)
Tonbridge and Malling Businesses
Tonbridge and Malling Schools
Tonbridge Community Forum
Tonbridge Town Team
Town & Parish Councils
Visit Kent
West Kent Partnership – including Sevenoaks DC & Tunbridge Wells BC
Key Funding Streams:
Business Rates Pool
Business Rates Retention Pilot (BRRP)
Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF)
UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)

TMBC.GOV.UK

Serving our community

Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council
Gibson Building
Gibson Drive
Kings Hill
West Malling
Kent
ME19 4LZ.

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