

West Kent Partnership 2024/25 Update

The West Kent Partnership (WKP) is an economic partnership of over 20 years, which is funded by Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council, Sevenoaks District Council and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and involves collaborative working amongst the Economic Development teams in the three authorities. The partnership promotes West Kent, champions key economic issues, engages with industry and business, delivers business support initiatives and pursues investment and funding to underpin innovation and growth.

The Council's Peer Challenge Review in 2022 highlighted the need for the partnership to be "focussed on delivering outcomes, not sharing information" and as such in recent years the partnership has become more focussed on collaborative project delivery and moved away from having a board that it reports to on a quarterly basis. This focus on delivery has been bolstered by the availability of external funding for projects that support growth in the local economy.

As such, a large amount of the work of the West Kent Partnership over the past 2-3 years has been on the delivery of UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund initiatives. This includes the West Kent Business Support Programme and the West Kent Rural Grants Scheme

West Kent Business Support Programme

During 2024/25, the West Kent Partnership continued the delivery of the UKSPF-funded business support programme. By the end of March 2025, the key outputs from the programme were:

- Provided support and advice to **708** small, start-up and pre-start-up businesses in West Kent (234 in the borough). This covered a range of different topics, but covered issues such as sales and marketing, recruitment and managing cashflow.
- Provided up to 8 hours of 1-2-1 mentoring to **100** small and start-up businesses (33 in the borough).
- Awarded **60** micro-grants (£500) to help support small-business growth (20 in the borough).
- Delivered **14** business workshop events across West Kent (5 in the borough – in Tonbridge and Kings Hill).
- Co-ordinated and delivered the West Kent Business Expo in March 2025 at the River Centre in Tonbridge (see pictures below). This was delivered in collaboration with the Sevenoaks District Chamber of Commerce (who cover West Kent), the Federation of Small Businesses and four local business sponsors (Carbon3, Baxall Construction, Thackray Williams and Biggin Hill Airport). In total there were 57 exhibitors at the event, and just under 500 attendees. In addition to the exhibitors, there were also 5 workshops, including sessions from Google on digital marketing; and Barclays on funding for growth.

Following the agreement of one additional year of UK Shared Prosperity Funding, the West Kent Business Support Programme is running again in 2025/26 and providing a similar level of offer to small businesses in West Kent.



West Kent Rural Grants Scheme

During 2024/25, the partnership also ran the West Kent Rural Grants Scheme, which was funded through the Rural England Prosperity Fund. The Scheme offers capital grants of up to £24,999 (covering 50% of total project cost) to support rural businesses and community organisations. The total pot of funding to distribute in 2024/25 was just over £370,000.

The scheme opened 7 rounds of calls for applications, with applications being initially appraised by officers before going to a West Kent public/private panel including elected representatives from the three West Kent local authorities (for TMBC, the Cabinet Member for Housing, Environment and Economy was the representative).

In total, the scheme supported 30 projects in Tonbridge and Malling during 2024/25. These projects covered most corners of the borough.

The table below includes projects receiving just over £400,000 of grant funding in total because 3 projects (Aylesford Priory, Bourne Valley and Borough Green Parish Council) part-completed in 2023/24 and as such around £30,000 of the grant funding included below was distributed to these in the preceding year:

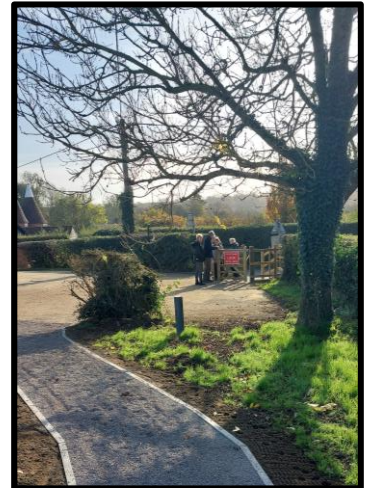
Organisation	Project	Location	Grant
Rock UK/Carrotty Wood	Equipment for outdoor adventure centre.	Nr Tonbridge	£5,761.49
ReCoir	Equipment for coir recycling.	Mereworth	£8,905.43
Phoenix Fireworks	Purchase of specialist spark and flame machines to grow business.	Wrotham	£10,960.54
Aylesford Priory Ltd	Hospitality refurbishment to heritage asset to grow visitor numbers.	Aylesford	£24,945.86
Borough Green PC	Improvements to Potters Mede Hall – including CCTV and toilets.	Borough Green	£14,283.73
Bourne Valley Ltd	All year round off-grid rural holiday accommodation.	Borough Green	£7,500.00
Addington Recreation Ground	Solar microgeneration with battery storage.	Addington	£7,850.00
Nut Farms	Specialist Pruning Equipment.	Plaxtol	£1,624.62
Friends of Offham School	Renovating existing playground.	Offham	£7,815.50
St Clere Estate	Woodland Management equipment - timber for sale to local community.	Nr Wrotham	£24,999.00
Reuthes	Installation of commercial parasols for visitor cover.	Nr Ightham	£11,139.50
The Swan Community Project	Purchase of The Swan on the Green to operate as a community hub.	West Peckham	£24,999.00
Mereworth Parish Council	New path through the recreation ground, with gates, notice board and badging sign.	Mereworth	£11,559.00
Kings Hill Parish Council	Installation of solar panels.	Kings Hill	£24,999.00
Ightham Mote (National Trust)	Recreation of a walled garden.	Ivy Hatch	£24,999.00
Communigrow	Purchase of polytunnel for community planting.	East Malling	£1,905.86
East Peckham Village Hall	Installation of solar panels.	East Peckham	£10,091.80
Hadlow Village Hall	New insulated metal roof for the village hall, plus installation of solar panels.	Hadlow	£17,656.00
Wateringbury Parish Council	Refurbishment of sports pavilion.	Wateringbury	£21,569.46
Retroelectrics	Funding a prototype to convert the Land Rover Defender into a recycled Zero Emissions Electric Vehicle.	Mereworth	£24,999.00
Hadlow Place Farms	Installation of a hunter game larder for processing and storing deer.	Nr Tonbridge	£11,337.00
The Finest Cake Company	Acquisition of specialist caramel making machines to facilitate the sale of innovative cakes and puddings.	Hadlow	£17,413.25
Wateringbury Post Office	Supply and install of Post Office equipment in new premises.	Wateringbury	£600.00

Rock UK/Carroty Wood	Development of a tented village to provide outdoor learning residential experiences for young people.	Nr Tonbridge	£7,500.00
Stansted Parish Council	Solar panels for village school building.	Stansted	£14,254.00
Wrotham Parish Council	PV solar installation with battery back-up.	Wrotham	£9,578.98
Fairseat Village Hall	Replacement roof with Insulation.	Fairseat	£6,750.00
Indian Dish	Purchase of larger, energy efficient van.	Kings Hill	£16,494.60
Spadework	New life skills kitchen for adults with learning difficulties.	Offham	£24,999.00
Stansted Parish Council	Purchase of screens and projectors for events and meetings.	Stansted	£2,279.17
Heart of Kent Hospice	Shopfront improvement.	West Malling	£5,000.00
TOTAL			£404,769.79

As part of an evaluation, feedback was sought from applicants to ascertain if there was anything that could be amended to the scheme. Overall, the feedback was very positive:



The photos below show some of the projects completed (or near completion). From left to right (and top to bottom), these projects are – solar panels at Kings Hill Community Centre, new polytunnel at Communigrow (East Malling), new pathway and gates at Queen Elizabeth Recreation Ground in Mereworth, new walled garden at Ightham Mote (Ivy Hatch).



Plans for 2025/26

Both the West Kent Business Support Programme and the West Kent Rural Grant Scheme are continuing in 2025/26 following announcements by Government that both the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Rural England Prosperity Fund would be extended for a one-year period.

The West Kent Rural Grant Scheme launched again on 16 June 2025, with the scheme offering to provide capital funding support of between £5,000 and £20,000 from a total pot of around £130,000.