

Finance, Regeneration and Property Scrutiny Select Committee

17 February 2026

Part 1 - Public

Matters for Information



Cabinet Member	Cllr Robin Betts, Cabinet Member for Housing, Environment and Economy
Responsible Officer	Damian Roberts, Chief Executive and Adrian Stanfield, Director of Central Services
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Cabinet Member Report – Economic Development and Property

1 Summary and Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report provides an overview of the economic development and property-related activities that the Council has undertaken over the past 12 months and sets out the plan for delivery in the coming year.

2 Corporate Strategy Priority Area

- 2.1 Investing in our local economy to help support residents and businesses and foster sustainable growth.
- 2.2 The Economic Regeneration and Property Teams undertake a wide range of projects that help to support sustainable growth in our borough economy for the benefit of our local residents and businesses.
- 2.3 Improving housing options for local people whilst protecting our outdoor areas of importance.
- 2.4 The Property Team has undertaken a number of measures to improve the availability of temporary accommodation to support some of our most vulnerable residents.
- 2.5 Sustaining a borough which cares for the environment.

- 2.6 A number of initiatives, such as the Carbon Descent Plans and installation of renewable and decarbonising technologies at our leisure facilities, installation of Electric Vehicle Charging Points at the Gibson Building, and the delivery of the Green Business Grant Scheme have contributed towards the council's Climate Change Strategy action plan.

3 Introduction and Background

- 3.1 The Economic Regeneration Team are responsible for supporting sustainable growth in the local economy and addressing areas of weakness in the borough's economic performance through a range of initiatives including business support, jobs fairs and grant schemes.
- 3.2 The Property Team are responsible for managing the Council's property portfolio and ensuring it helps support delivery of the Council's strategic objectives. This includes generating income from the Council's investment/commercial, operating and maintaining our offices at Kings Hill and Tonbridge Castle as well as maintaining and improving a broad range of buildings from leisure centres to public conveniences.
- 3.3 In recent years, the borough council has delivered on a range of initiatives that have contributed towards the delivery of the Corporate Strategy 2023-2027. In addition to the use of its own resources, this delivery has been supported by external funding, principally from Government (such as the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund) and through Section 106 funding.

4 Economic Regeneration Activities

- 4.1 Much of the work of the Economic Regeneration Team is steered by the Economic Development Strategy 2023-2027 which sits underneath the Corporate Strategy 2023-2027 and was adopted by Cabinet in January 2024. The Economic Development Strategy sets out a vision – 'Maximising the unique strengths of the local area to help create a resilient, dynamic and inclusive economy that fosters sustainable growth' – that is underpinned by 7 themes which form the basis of the Action Plan. These seven themes are:

- Promoting the Borough
- Supporting Local Business
- Land and Premises
- A Greener more Productive Economy
- A Thriving Rural Economy
- An Inclusive Economy
- Vibrant Town Centres

4.2 In terms of activities specifically over the past 12 months, these have been further shaped and defined by two documents: the Annual Service Delivery Plan 2025/26 and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund Investment Plan 2022-26 which identifies the following economic regeneration activities:

4.2.1 **Delivery of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) Programme:** the initial 3-year UKSPF Programme (up to end of March 2025) was delivered in full with the £1m externally funded budget all spent on supporting our local communities and businesses. This programme comprised a number of economic initiatives:

- **Shopfront and Vacant Unit Improvement Scheme ('Vibrant Town Centres')** – a capital grant scheme offering grants of up to £5,000 (60% of total eligible cost) to independent businesses or property owners to carry out improvements to shopfronts, bring vacant units back into use or carry out energy efficiency measures. **33** businesses from across the borough benefited from this scheme.
- **Green Business Grant Scheme ('A Greener more Productive Economy')** – a capital grant scheme offering grants of up to £8,000 (40% of total eligible cost) to businesses in the borough with a commercial premises to reduce their carbon footprint. Most common interventions were the installation of solar panels, air source heat pumps and EV charging points. **18** businesses from across the borough benefited from this scheme.
- **West Kent Business Support Programme ('Supporting Local Business')** – jointly commissioned by the 3 West Kent authorities, Smarter Society delivered a programme of events, training, mentoring service and small grants scheme for small and start-up businesses in the area. By the end of March 2025, the key outputs from the programme were:
 - A) 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.
 - B) Provided up to 8 hours of 1-2-1 mentoring to **100** small and start-up businesses (33 in the borough).
 - C) Awarded **60** micro-grants (£500) to help support small-business growth (20 in the borough).
 - D) Delivered **14** business workshop events across West Kent (5 in the borough – in Tonbridge and Kings Hill).
 - E) 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. Life Skills Project.

- **Digital Inclusion Project ('An Inclusive Economy')**: a scheme aimed at helping people in financial hardship; unemployed or a young person (16-25) not in education, employment or training that are digitally excluded through the provision of hardware and training. In total, 308 applications were received to be part of the scheme with **172** approved (the majority of those turned down were not resident in the borough or did not meet the hardship criteria, but were offered some support through other projects). A geographical distribution of beneficiaries is provided in **Annex 1**. The remaining handful of devices at the end of the project were given to 4 local organisations supporting residents in Tonbridge and Malling to able them to initiate or continue digital inclusion projects – Tonbridge Amateur Boxing Club, East Malling Centre, Tonbridge Baptist Church and Compaid.
- 4.2.2 With a one-year extension to the UKSPF programme during 2025/26 (albeit with less funding provided by Government), the Green Business Grant Scheme and the West Kent Business Support Programme have continued into this financial year. To date, an additional 4 businesses have been supported through the Green Business Grant Scheme in 2025/26 and the West Kent Business Support Programme has delivered 1-to-1 mentoring sessions for 20 start-up businesses in the borough, along with training opportunities, and another round of the popular micro-grants scheme (which supported 10 businesses). On 11 March 2026, the third annual West Kent Expo will take place at the River Centre in Tonbridge.
- 4.2.3 **Delivery of the Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) Programme ('A Thriving Rural Economy')**: During 2024/25, the West Kent authorities collaboratively ran the West Kent Rural Grants Scheme, which was funded through the Rural England Prosperity Fund. The Scheme offered 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.
- 4.2.4 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 the borough council, the Cabinet Member for Housing, Environment and Economy was the representative).

- 4.2.5 In total, the scheme supported 30 projects in Tonbridge and Malling during 2024/25 with projects covering most eligible parts of the borough. Further details can be accessed from Report FRP 25/16 which went to this committee in July 2025.
- 4.2.6 For 2025/26, the Borough Council received further REPF funding from Government, albeit a smaller pot (just over £130,000). All of this funding was allocated to projects by the panel during July-September 2025, with successful applicants needing to complete their projects and submit evidence of completion before the end of the financial year. To date, all bar one project has now completed, with 93% of the budget spent (funding is claimed on completion of a project).
- 4.2.7 **People and Skills Scheme ('An Inclusive Economy')**: In 2024/25, 4 organisations were awarded funding (up to £5,000) to deliver projects that helped people furthest from the workplace with volunteering, experience and enrichment activities (with project running until December 2025). The four organisations were:
- The Oaks Specialist College and Runway Training (collaborative project): training and work experience in the hospitality sector for 18-25 year olds with disabilities.
 - Compaid Trust: project to deliver digital skills training to older people to reduce social isolation, increase access to medical services and enhance well-being and independence.
 - Communigrow: therapeutic gardening group for veterans and ex-emergency service personnel.
- 4.2.8 In May 2025, a further round of this scheme was opened up for applications with 10 organisations ultimately securing funding for projects that will be delivered by the end of the financial year.
- 4.2.9 **Business Rates Pool (Shared Growth Fund) Programme**: having been approved by Kent County Council, the proposed £1.125m programme of activities was agreed by Cabinet on 30 June 2025 (Report CB 25/74). The Programme includes a number of measures to support the local economy to be delivered by teams from across the Council. Included within the programme is the launch of a further round of the Green Business Grant Scheme, which offers grants of up to £5,000 (at an intervention rate of 50% of total eligible costs) towards carbon reduction and energy efficiency measures. The new round opened for applications on 05 February 2026 with a deadline of 02 April 2026. See 4.2.7 for information on other initiatives to be delivered through this programme by the Economic Regeneration Team.
- 4.2.10 **Working with strategic partners to bring forward employment sites ('Land and Premises')**: beyond the vital role played by the planning department in bringing forward employment sites, the Economic Regeneration team does also

engage with developers to support and encourage inward investment through the provision of economic data, links with local businesses and information about financial support – recent examples include Panattoni Park Aylesford, the RBLI Factory and London Golf Club.

4.2.11 Other activities include:

- Invest West Kent ('Promoting the Borough') - establishment of a new website to provide businesses and inward investors with useful information about the area and the support that is available to them - <https://investwestkent.com/>. This is particularly needed following the closure of Locate in Kent and Visit Kent.
- Jobs Fairs in Tonbridge and Aylesford ('An Inclusive Economy') – the Economic Regeneration team have been working with the Job Centres for a number of years now to deliver jobs fairs the give recruiters and job seekers an opportunity to meet face-to-face to discuss opportunities. The most recent jobs fair took place in Aylesford on 05 November 2025 and had over 200 people attend.
- T&M Business e-Bulletin – providing approximately 850 subscribers with monthly business-relevant information about local news, activities, events and funding opportunities. Anyone can subscribe via <http://eepurl.com/dthPW1>

4.2.12 In terms of planning for the next 12 months, the following are key activities:

- Successfully complete the UKSPF and REPF Programmes, which both end in March 2026.
- Monitor and oversee the completion of the remaining 'People and Skills' projects from Round 1 and 2 and ensure completion in 2026.
- Move forward with the Business Rates Pool (Shared Growth Fund) Programme, which includes:
 - a) A funding pot to continue 'People and Skills' activities – which could culminate in the launch of a Round 3 of the scheme.
 - b) Funding to extend the contract for the Economic Development Officer (P/T) position.
- Continued partnership working with the Job Centres to support getting residents into well-paid employment through the provision of jobs fairs.
- Ongoing work with the Economic Regeneration Teams at Sevenoaks DC and Tunbridge Wells BC on Invest West Kent, particularly the delivery of the West Kent Expo in March 2026.

5 Property Activities

5.1 Over the last 12 to 18 months the Property Team have progressed a wide range of activities in support of the Council's Corporate Strategy, as listed below.

5.1.1 Renewables and energy efficiency measures

- Installation of 149 solar panels at Tonbridge Pool, generating around 65 MWhs per year with estimated savings in the region of £13,175 per year
- Installation of 150 LED light fittings at Tonbridge Pool, with estimated savings in the region of £7,100 per year
- Installation of 450 solar panels at Larkfield Leisure Centre (in addition to the 190 existing), generating around 215 MWhs per year with estimated savings in the region of £43,581 per year. Funding from Swimming Pool Support Fund.
- Installation of 340 LED light fittings at Larkfield Leisure Centre, with estimated savings in the region of £13,950 per year. Funding from Swimming Pool Support Fund.
- Installation of increased roof insulation above the changing areas at Larkfield Leisure Centre. Funding from UK Shared Prosperity Fund.
- Continuing work to install air source heat pumps and a new air handling unit to supply the fitness pool at Larkfield Leisure Centre and removal of gas boilers. Funding from Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme. Project due for completion April 2026.
- Continuing design work to install air source heat pumps at Poulton Wood Golf Centre and removal of the oil boilers. Funding from Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme. Project due for completion by March 2027.
- Commencement of work on site to install air source heat pumps to replace the gas boilers and solar panels at the Council's Gibson East offices

5.1.2 Gibson Office Consolidation

- Tendering the refurbishment of Gibson Building East and awarding the contract.
- Relocation of staff, including reception, from Gibson Building East to Gibson Building West.
- Commencement of work on site.
- Procure and instruct agents to market Gibson Building West

5.1.3 Temporary Accommodation Provision

- Supporting Housing Services in identifying opportunities to provide the Councils directly owned temporary accommodation
- Completion of lease arrangements for 19 apartments in Tonbridge town centre
- Progression of modular housing scheme at Blue Bell Hill, including seeking internal approvals, tendering the design and build contract, awarding the work to Zed Pods, submitting and obtaining planning permission and undertaking public engagement
- Conducting negotiations and reporting to Members a proposal to lease a further 20 apartments in Tonbridge

5.1.4 Facility Improvements / Repairs

- Delivery of the health suite refurbishment at Tonbridge Pool which has resulted in a significant increase in customers using the facilities
- Progressing the wet changing area refurbishment at Larkfield Leisure Centre including tendering the work, awarding the contract and commencing work on site
- Completion of repairs to Tonbridge Castle Gatehouse roof which required a large scaffold both externally and internally, as well as a temporary roof to protect both the facility and contractors whilst work was undertaken
- Completion of re-felting flat roof areas at Larkfield Leisure Centre in preparation for installation of solar panels, including upgrading roof insulation
- Delivering around £800,000 of servicing, repair and maintenance activities up to the end of December this financial year across the Council's estate

5.1.5 Miscellaneous

- In partnership with the Customer Services and Economic Regeneration Teams, help deliver the temporary banking hub at Tonbridge Castle
- Completion of agreement with Sainsbury's in Tonbridge to facilitate their store expansion and refurbishment

5.2 Priorities For the Next 12 Months

- Gibson office consolidation. Completion of the Gibson East refurbishment work and relocation of staff, including Kent Police, into the building from Gibson West. Reporting offers received for Gibson West to Members.

- Temporary accommodation at Blue Bell Hill. Should planning permission be granted, commence work on site.
- Completion of the Larkfield Leisure Centre wet change refurbishment project.
- Completion of the Poulton Wood Golf Centre air source heat pump project.
- Completion of the Larkfield Leisure Centre fitness pool air source heat pump project.

6 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

6.1 All the services are delivered within the Council's budgetary framework.

7 Risk Assessment

7.1 None associated with this report.

8 Legal Implications

8.1 The matters raised in this report are considered to be routine, uncontroversial or not legally complex and a legal opinion has not been sought on these proposals.

9 Consultation and Communications

9.1 This report is aimed at ensuring that Members are aware of the work of the Economic Regeneration and Property Teams and their contribution to the Council's Corporate Strategy and the Annual Service Delivery Plan 2025/26.

10 Cross Cutting Issues

10.1 Climate Change and Biodiversity

10.1.1 Some impact on reducing emissions in support of carbon neutral by 2030 or enhancing the natural environment.

10.1.2 Climate change advice has not been sought in the preparation of the options and recommendations in this report.

10.1.3 Some of the initiatives undertaken by the Economic Regeneration and Property teams have a significant and direct impact on reducing emissions, such as the Carbon Descent Plans for our leisure centres or the Green Business Grant Scheme, whereas others have a smaller or indirect impact, such as the Shopfront and Vacant Unit Improvement Scheme.

10.2 Equalities and Diversity

10.2.1 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

10.3 Other If Relevant

- Business Continuity / Resilience
- Healthy Lifestyles

10.3.1 Initiatives support the Council's own resilience through improvements to Council property, as well as can help our local businesses to become more robust through business support, advice and grants.

10.3.2 These initiatives also indirectly support healthy lifestyles, be it through providing and maintaining the property that provides services that are beneficial to our residents, or through helping our businesses and the associated knock-on economic benefits to staff (with economic well-being having a bearing on healthy lifestyles).

Background Papers	None
Annexes	Annex 1 – map showing geographical spread of beneficiaries of the Digital Inclusion Project