

Economic Development Strategy 2023–2026

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council



Contents

Foreword	3
Executive Summary	4
1. Economic Development for Tunbridge Wells	5
2. Key Partnerships	7
3. National and Local Context	8
4. Current Activity and Key Issues	12
5. Economic Development Aims and Objectives	27
6. Economic Development Action Plan and Economic Indicators Dashboard	33
7. Approach to Monitoring	34
Appendix A: Tunbridge Wells UKSPF Projects	35
Appendix B: Tunbridge Wells REPF Projects	38
Appendix C: Relevant Plans and Strategies	39
Appendix D: List of partner organisations	40
Appendix E: Transport Projects	41



All Saints Church, Brenchley

Foreword

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council aims to support sustainable economic development and create an environment which attracts new investment and enables businesses to flourish. A thriving local economy is fundamental to our communities, providing jobs and wages as well as the services that support everyday life. We know our residents value living in communities that are active, prospering and attractive to visitors. In the TWBC's budget consultation of 2022-23, residents were asked to weight the Council's five priorities, and 'Vibrant and safer towns and villages' was the most popular choice among all age groups.



The borough of Tunbridge Wells is a wonderful and enterprising place in which to live and work. However, over the past few years, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have collectively had a significant impact on the local economy. As a result, some businesses have closed; some have opened; and some have changed the way they operate. In addition, many businesses are making adaptations to achieve net zero targets. And all the while, the traditional High Street is in flux.

Working with a wide range of partner organisations, the Council focuses its available resources to proactively support local businesses - existing and new - as they recover from recent events and build their resilience for the future. This Strategy communicates the myriad ways in which the Economic Development team carries out its work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Rutland'.

Cllr Justine Rutland

Cabinet Member for Economic Development
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council



The Pantiles

Executive Summary

This Strategy has been prepared to guide the Council's Economic Development activity in the period 2023-26. Since the publication of the last Strategy in 2018, there have been considerable changes to the national and local context informing our approach to economic development. Covid-19, high inflation, the climate emergency, changes in our trading relationship with Europe and a host of other factors have impacted on the way local businesses operate and the support they require to survive, adapt and grow.

To provide this support the Council's approach will focus on working with a network of partner organisations to provide added value initiatives. The intention is to seek to work with partners to maximise the impact of local expertise and resources in meeting shared priorities.

The Economic Development service operates within the strategic context of the Council's overarching priorities for delivering a better borough, its development plan (detailed in the New Local Plan) and a range of other strategies and policies relating to topics such as decarbonisation and the future of Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre.

The identification of local aims and focus areas for this strategy also derives from ongoing work with partners across the borough, detailed in the sections on Key Partners and on Current Activity and Issues. In addition, a consultation was undertaken between 4 September and 16 October 2023, in which a draft of this Strategy was widely circulated, and a range of views and responses were received.

The aims of this Economic Development Strategy are to:

- Support the development of a sustainable and inclusive local economy - that delivers for local businesses and communities, respecting the natural environment and the architectural heritage in the borough.
- Work with partners to create a business support offer that provides the best opportunities to start, grow, and invest in businesses and destinations across the borough.
- Work with partners including Town & Parish Councils to create safe and vibrant towns and villages in the borough, where businesses and communities will thrive.

These aims will be delivered through the areas of focus:

- **Aiming for Net Zero**
Help businesses to decarbonise their operations and undertake adaptation and mitigation measures to become resilient to climate change.
- **Creating Destinations**
Work with partners to create town centres and high streets that are mixed use destinations for employment, leisure, culture, retail and community use.
- **Encouraging Enterprise & Employment**
Support enterprise and business growth in the borough to provide employment opportunities to enable residents to live well in the borough.
- **Supporting Rural Businesses & Communities**
Develop and diversify our rural economy and

build strong communities across the borough.

- **Improving Sustainable Access & Connectivity**

Develop sustainable transport & digital networks to support the vitality and competitiveness of the local economy, recognising the need to meet net-zero ambitions and targets.

These aims and areas of focus inform the activities detailed in the Action Plan. The Action Plan provides information on specific projects and the approach to monitoring their delivery is also set out.



Tunbridge Wells Station clock tower

1. Economic Development for Tunbridge Wells

Economic Development services within local councils aim to improve the economic well-being and quality of life of communities and businesses across their particular area. As such, economic development is a key component in the Council's plan for **Building a Better Borough (2022)**.

Whilst this Strategy sets out the priorities for the Economic Development Team between 2023 – 2026, the wide-ranging nature of economic development means that it is set within the context of, and aligned with, other strategies prepared by the Council.

The key relevant Council documents are set out below:

- **A Climate Strategy and Action Plan for Tunbridge Wells:**
This document details the ways in which the Council is working towards its commitment to be carbon neutral by 2030, alongside a range of initiatives to help businesses and households lower their emissions. The Strategy and Action Plan will be published for consultation in early 2024.
- **The new Tunbridge Wells Local Plan (Submission Local Plan 2021):**
The Council is producing a new Local Plan which is in its final stages of preparation and currently subject to Examination. It sets out a vision, objectives and strategic policies for future growth in the borough and identified sites for housing, employment and other uses. The Submission Local Plan was submitted to the Secretary of State for examination by an independent Inspector in November 2021 and was then subject to a number of

Examination in Public hearings which took place between 1 March and 15 July 2022. The Council received a letter setting out the Inspector's findings following these hearing sessions, in early November 2022. The work to consider and respond to the initial findings of the Inspector is currently in progress. Section 5 of the Submission Local Plan includes place shaping policies and proposed site allocations and Section 6 of the Submission Local Plan includes the Economic Development Management Policies (ED1-ED12) for employment and retail/service provision which are to be taken into account in the assessment of planning proposals.

- **A Town Centre Plan for Royal Tunbridge Wells:**
The Council is currently working on the preparation of the Town Centre Plan which will provide a long-term strategy up to 2040 to help create and sustain a more prosperous town centre. The plan will provide a vision, objectives and a planning framework for the future of the town centre.
- **Neighbourhood Development Plans:**
Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs) were introduced under the Localism Act 2011, to allow planning and decision making to be carried out at a more local level. NDPs need to conform with national policy, local adopted plans and other legal requirements. These plans can be used to develop a shared vision. A number of the borough's Parish and Town Councils have been preparing NDPs and some of these Plans contain policies relating to employment, retail/local services and transport issues.



- **UK Shared Prosperity Fund Investment Plan:**

A funded programme of local projects in Tunbridge Wells was approved by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) in December 2022, covering the three financial years from 2022-2025. An addendum to the Investment Plan has also been approved by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), providing additional funding for rural projects across the borough. Details of the UKSPF projects can be found in Appendices A and B.

In addition, this Strategy is set within the context of a very challenging period for public sector finances. The Action Plan includes initiatives where it is believed that the Council can bring expertise, effective collaboration with partners and deliver positive results for businesses and communities, whilst also ensuring public value for money. The Council will seek to maximise what can be achieved with the limited resources available.

The Strategy has also been prepared in the recognition that some macro-economic factors (as set out in Section 3) are outside the control of the Council, but that there are still significant ways in which the Council and its partners can make a positive difference.

Relevant work that is being undertaken by other teams within the Council that supports economic development, is referenced throughout this document and Appendix C provides a full list of the relevant plans and strategies.



Render of Cinema Site Development, Royal Tunbridge Wells

2. Key Partnerships

Kent and Medway Economic Partnership (KMEP)

The Kent and Medway Economic Partnership



aims to drive forward economic growth and prosperity throughout the region. KMEP is governed by a Board and chaired by the private sector, with membership drawn from business, local government, further and higher education. Following the closure of the South East Local Enterprise Partnership, KMEP will be taking on a greater responsibility for regional funding decisions and has been instructed to work closely with local authorities at the more local level. KMEP is currently preparing the Kent & Medway Economic Framework to support growth across the area.

Kent County Council

TWBC works with Kent County Council (KCC) on issues including transport, employment and skills, the cultural and creative economy, and the environment. KCC has prepared a Council Strategy (2022) detailing its priorities for 2022-26. The priorities are focused around levelling up the county, building infrastructure for communities and protecting the environment. The Strategy sets out a pathway to net zero by 2050, which includes the development of a carbon footprint calculator for Kent and Medway, green infrastructure and large-scale retrofitting initiatives. KCC's levelling up agenda is focused on addressing the issues that are barriers to economic growth and prosperity in Kent. This includes developing skills in line with evolving business needs, supporting schools to deliver accessible high-quality education, improving outcomes in deprived communities and reducing health inequalities across the county.



West Kent Partnership

TWBC works particularly closely with the neighbouring authorities of Sevenoaks District Council and Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council, as the West Kent Partnership. The three authorities share many local economic characteristics and pool resources to add value to initiatives across the three districts, promoting business growth, connections, inward investment and resilience.

Invest West Kent



Locate in Kent

Locate in Kent (LIK) is the county's inward investment agency, helping businesses find commercial property and skilled staff, and to connect with networks and clients across Kent. LIK has recently published an Investment Prospectus and a digital platform, providing a vision and real time data on commercial development and investment opportunities across the county.



Visit Kent

TWBC has an ongoing partnership with Visit Kent, the Destination Management Organisation for the county. This partnership work helps support visitor economy businesses in the borough by extending the reach of marketing activities to national and international audiences and commissioning research to help shape our messaging.



Royal Tunbridge Wells Together (RTWT)

RTWT is the Business Improvement District (BID) for Royal Tunbridge Wells town centre, established following a ballot of local businesses in 2018. Since then, the Council has worked in partnership with the BID on projects to support the town centre through a challenging period. Additionally, in partnership with RTWT, Applause Rural Touring, the Amelia and KCC, the Council is now working to set up Creative Tunbridge Wells to support and grow the creative economy.



Town and Parish Councils

It is recognised that there are many businesses located in the rural areas of the borough and in the smaller town centres and therefore Town and Parish Councils are key partners across a range of projects set out in this Strategy. Many of the Parishes have already prepared Neighbourhood Development Plans for their areas or are in the process of doing so. The Council also maintains a positive working relationship with Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum, the aim of which is to represent the un-parished area of the town while its members undertake research on many issues relating to economic development within the town.

Amplifi

Amplifi is a new partnership comprising businesses and organisations based in Royal Tunbridge Wells that are committed to creating a network to drive sustainability by sharing knowledge and expertise. The Council is keen to support Amplifi which could help to deliver the aims of the borough's Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan.

Appendix D sets out a full list of the partners that the Council works with to deliver initiatives to support Economic Development.

3. National and Local Context

National Picture

Since the last Economic Development Strategy was adopted in 2018, there have been considerable changes within the UK economy. The section below highlights some of these, both those that are temporary and others that are longer term in their nature.

Net Zero

In June 2019, the UK government passed legislation committing the country to achieving 'net zero' greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. That same year Kent County Council and TWBC declared 'Climate Emergencies' and adopted regional and local responses to combat climate change.

Achieving net zero will require changes that are unprecedented in their scale and scope, including the way electricity is generated, how people travel, how land is used and how buildings are heated. Businesses will need to play their part in addressing this challenge and many are already leading the way in making changes.

Covid

The Covid-19 restrictions, put in place to protect public health, seriously disrupted trading during 2020 and 2021. Post-pandemic, a number of businesses were left weaker, carrying more debt, smaller reserves, and having to adapt to a markedly different business environment. This was especially the case for retailers, leisure and hospitality venues and their suppliers. Some did not survive but many are now on the road to recovery.

The Covid pandemic also greatly accelerated the move towards increased home working and/or hybrid working for some business sectors. Although there has been a return to the office for many this is often for 2-3 days a week. This trend has also led to an increased use of co-working and flexible workspaces.

Brexit

The United Kingdom officially left the European Union on 31 January 2020. This has required businesses that trade with Europe to adapt their operations and has also led to difficulties with the recruitment of staff. There is some evidence that suggests that there may have been a negative impact on the visitor economy, at least in the short term (although to date the effect is difficult to separate from the Covid impact).

Inflation and the Cost-of-Living Crisis

Figure 1: Data provided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS)

Since late 2021 the UK has experienced a period of high inflation, peaking at 11.1% in October 2022. This has primarily focused on energy prices, mortgage rates and essential household items including food, but has also increased costs for businesses, especially in relation to services and supply chains.



Levelling Up Agenda

In March 2021, the Government published its Levelling Up White Paper, setting out a series of missions and targeted support to parts of the UK that have historically suffered from under-investment. As part of the Levelling Up agenda, the Government announced the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund to provide devolved funding to local authorities across the country for a three-year period (2022-25). TWBC submitted an Investment Plan for both funds, which have subsequently been approved, and local projects are now underway. A table of these projects is included in Appendices A and B.



Artificial Intelligence (AI)

There has been an exponential advance in Digital and AI infrastructure and use in the economy since the last Strategy was published. The UK Government has sought to address the opportunities and threats posed by these rapid developments in a number of recent strategies and work on this is ongoing.

Tunbridge Wells Local Economy

The borough of Tunbridge Wells is located in West Kent and borders the local authorities of Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Malling, Maidstone and Ashford in Kent as well as Rother and Wealden in East Sussex. The borough is part of a distinctive West Kent economic area (covering Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Malling, and Tunbridge Wells local authority areas) with close links between the main settlements. Due to its location and transport infrastructure, Tunbridge Wells and the other west Kent authorities benefit from a close proximity to London, Gatwick and the channel ports of Folkestone and Dover. These links allow local businesses to connect with international markets, partners and clients in a way that other locations cannot. This proximity and ease of access also provides significant opportunities for the visitor economy including in the borough's rural locations.

West Kent has the highest proportion of business start-ups in Kent, a stronger representation of higher value, knowledge-based industries than anywhere else in the county and also boasts the strongest business survival rates. The area provides significant employment to both local residents and those living elsewhere in Kent and further afield, including many high-skilled, well-paid jobs.

Tunbridge Wells is an attractive business location. The local economy is largely characterised by micro, and small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). However, there are a small number of larger employers that contribute significantly to the economic health and prosperity of the borough. There is strong sectoral representation in: finance and insurance; scientific and technical; wholesale and retail; human health and social work; hospitality (visitor economy); creative; and

education. In addition, there is a small, well-skilled manufacturing sector, and an extensive agricultural sector that accounts for over 90% of land use in the borough.

Royal Tunbridge Wells is the primary urban centre of the borough and a significant employment, retail, education, service and transport hub. It is a historic and vibrant town drawing trade, business connections and visitors from London, the wider South East.

The landscape of Tunbridge Wells is dominated by the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) which covers almost two thirds of the borough. This rural area includes a number of towns and villages with distinct independent high streets and local services, including Cranbrook, Hawkhurst and Paddock Wood.

Tunbridge Wells first became a destination for leisure, culture and tourism in the 1600s and it continues to be a high-quality visitor destination today, with attractions including historic National Trust properties, outdoor activities, theatres and museums. The borough is home to an increasing number of hospitality businesses including accommodation and food and beverage outlets.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, TWBC commissioned work to support the preparation of this Strategy and Action Plan. This included a survey of 200 local businesses to identify both the barriers to growth and the type of support that would be welcomed. Using the findings from the business survey and other available evidence, a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis) has been undertaken to provide an overview of the local economy and present areas for intervention by the Council and its partners. This SWOT is set out in Figure 4.



Figure 2: Tunbridge Wells Borough within the South East

Figure 3: Tunbridge Wells Local Economy Indicators

115,311 residents in Tunbridge Wells borough	6,300 PAYE enterprises in Tunbridge Wells	Highest first year survival rate (91.9%) for businesses in Kent
90% of businesses are micro (1-9 employees), 8% small (10-49), 1% medium (50-249) and 0.2% large (250+)	Largest Sectors: Human Health and Social Work activities (13.8%) Wholesale, Retail and Repair (13.7%) Education (10.3%)	Fastest Growing Sectors: Real Estate Activities (£208m Gross Value Added (GVA) increase) Professional, Scientific & Technical (£194m)
FTE earnings for residents: £45,688 p/a FTE earnings for those working in the borough: £29,180	50% of residents out commute for work, including: 20% in Kent 19% in London 11% elsewhere	4.3 million visitors to the borough each year
Tunbridge Wells 83rd out of 360 national locations on the UK Competitiveness Index	GVA (Gross Value Added) of £3.615bn for the borough	GVA of £54,106 per worker
Unemployment rate is at 2.3% , down from 4.6% in March 2021.	24.5% of employees are employed in the Knowledge Economy (technical & scientific innovation) – the highest level in Kent	41.1% of residents 16–64 are at National Vocational Qualification Level 4+

Sources: ONS, KCC, HJA Evidence Base, LGA, Nottingham Business School, and Cardiff University



Sissinghurst Castle



Figure 4: SWOT Analysis of the Tunbridge Wells Economy

4. Current Activity and Key Issues

This section provides an overview of current activity that is being undertaken by the Council and its partners and the key issues that are shaping the local economy which this Strategy aims to address.

Net Zero Target

In 2019, Full Council recognised the impact of Climate Change and made a declaration of a Climate and Biodiversity Emergency. To act on this, an ambition has been set to reach carbon neutrality for the Council's own activities by 2030 and also to support carbon neutrality for the wider borough by the same date. A cross-party Climate Emergency Advisory Panel has been set up and a Climate Strategy and Action Plan is being prepared with the following aims, to:

- To support borough-wide mitigation efforts to reduce emissions and reach net-zero by 2030
- Collaborate with stakeholders to facilitate climate action across sectors and service areas outside of TWBC's control
- Ensure the actions in this Strategy complement other council-led strategies, such as the Borough-partnership Strategy and the new Tunbridge Wells Local Plan
- Raise awareness of, and engagement in, climate action and the need for a just transition to net zero across the borough
- Ensure actions facilitate climate justice across all demographics in the community
- Recognise the needs of the community, and ensure that stakeholders are consulted to allow for inclusive decision-making

From an economic development perspective, the borough's path to net zero will require a rapid decarbonisation of the local economy. To support this, the Council will look to provide signposting to resources that will assist businesses in decarbonising their premises, supply chains, deliveries and business travel and will seek to support the new business-led partnership Amplifi.

Employment sites and premises

The limited number of appropriate employment sites and premises has been a constraint to enterprise in the borough over recent years, acting as a barrier to inward investment and wider development. This shortage has been exacerbated due to the conversion of floorspace from office to residential use under Permitted Development Rights (PDR) legislation, particularly in Royal Tunbridge Wells town centre. The town centre now has an ageing stock of employment floorspace, which will require renovation or redevelopment to ensure that it is fit for modern ways of working.

Article 4 Directions - In response to concerns about the extent of conversions from office space to residential under Permitted Development Rights, a detailed Town Centre Office Study (Durlings, 2018) was commissioned for Royal Tunbridge Wells, and then updated in 2021 (Retail, Commercial Leisure and Town Centre Uses Study). The Study recommended the use of Article 4 Directions to be placed on key remaining office spaces in the town centre and the Council has taken this forward. Although an Article 4 Direction does not prevent planning applications for change of use, it does allow a full consideration

of the impact of such applications by the Council (as the Local Planning Authority).

Key Employment Areas - The new Tunbridge Wells Local Plan (Submission Local Plan 2021) identifies a number of Key Employment Areas (KEAs) and provides land allocations for the development of new employment space, based on evidence from an Economic Needs Assessment. The KEAs are set out below:

- Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre
- Royal Tunbridge Wells North Farm/Longfield Road area
- Southborough High Brooms Industrial Area
- Paddock Wood Eldon Way and West of Maidstone Road
- Paddock Wood Transfesa Road East and West
- Hawkhurst Station Business Park
- Capel Brook Farm

The Plan also sets out criteria-based protection policies requiring robust evidence that an existing employment site or premise is no longer viable for employment with a minimum of 18 months marketing activity before alternative development can be explored.

Co-working Space - The Council is also taking proactive steps itself to deliver employment workspace. A partnership with Town Square Spaces Ltd has been agreed, creating a modern workspace in Tunbridge Wells Town Hall, which will include coworking, over 60 offices, meeting rooms and an event space, as well as business and start-up support.

Previously, the Council has worked with private and public sector partners to open The House in Monson Road, which provides flexible space for the creative sector. There are now a number of other flexible workspaces in Royal Tunbridge Wells and the wider borough including: Office Tribe, Other Space, Regus and the Hive (in Cranbrook and Royal Tunbridge Wells).

Enterprise – Tunbridge Wells is a highly entrepreneurial borough, with an average of over 600 new businesses established each year. The local economy is dominated by small and micro-businesses (90% employ less than 10 people), with high levels of self-employment (13%) as well as many home-based businesses.

The borough economy is sustained by the relationships between its diverse array of entrepreneurs and small enterprises, where individuals and micro enterprises work together to provide services that would otherwise be provided in house (financial, HR, property, legal etc.). This model has proved successful, and Tunbridge Wells has risen to 83rd out of 360 national locations on the UK Competitiveness Index.

However, there is a limit to the growth potential of this model, as viable enterprises with high growth potential can struggle to ‘lift-off’ and transition into medium or large firms that would generate further investment and development opportunities in the borough. As already indicated, the new Tunbridge Wells Local Plan (Submission Local Plan 2021) seeks to address development land constraints, but there is also a need for targeted support to help business to grow as well as to attract inward investment into the borough.



Town Centre, Royal Tunbridge Wells

The Tunbridge Wells Business Survey (2021)

Prepared as part of the evidence for this Strategy, the survey identified a number of the key barriers limiting the growth of business and also a list of support needs as shown in Figures 5 and 6.

The Council already offers a number of support services to local businesses. This includes the provision of information and resources via a new Business Portal, a monthly business newsletter, social media platforms, as well as a calendar of business networking events at locations across the borough.

Business Portal - The online Business Portal is a one-stop shop linking businesses to relevant Council services including Rates, Planning, Environmental Health, and Licensing. The Business Portal also provides signposting to programmes of business support provided by government agencies and other partner organisations. There is a wide range of support offered at a county level, which has been brought together within the Kent and Medway Growth Hub website. This includes details of grants, loans and support initiatives offered by the Government, Kent County Council, Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce and other support organisations.

Business Welcome Pack –To supplement the Portal, a digital Business Welcome Pack has been prepared and published. The document provides information on how to access Council Services and provides signposting to additional support offered by our partners. The Business Welcome Pack will be regularly updated to ensure businesses will be able to continue to use it as a resource for the duration of this Economic Development Strategy.

What are the main barriers limiting the growth of your business?

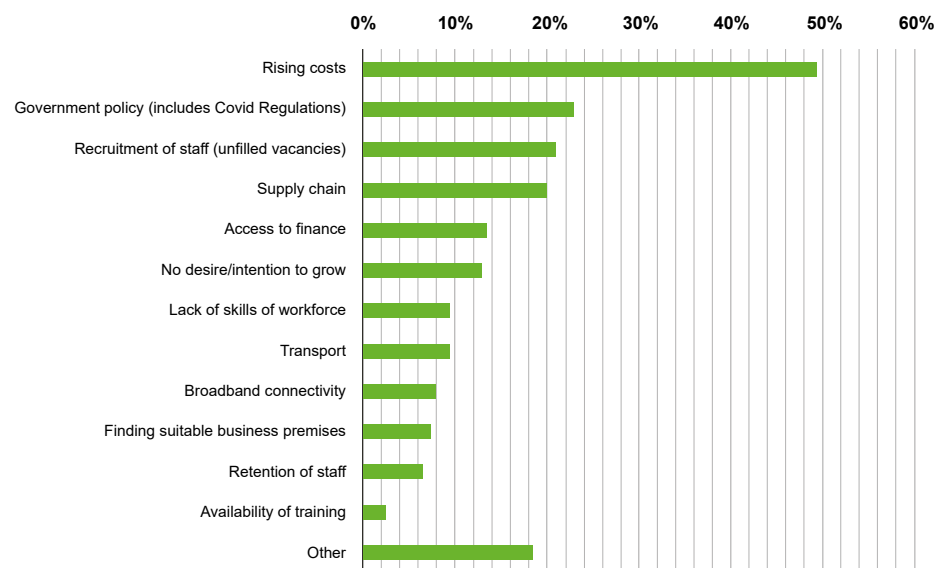


Figure 5: Barriers to business growth

Which of these support services would you be interested in if they were readily accessible to you?

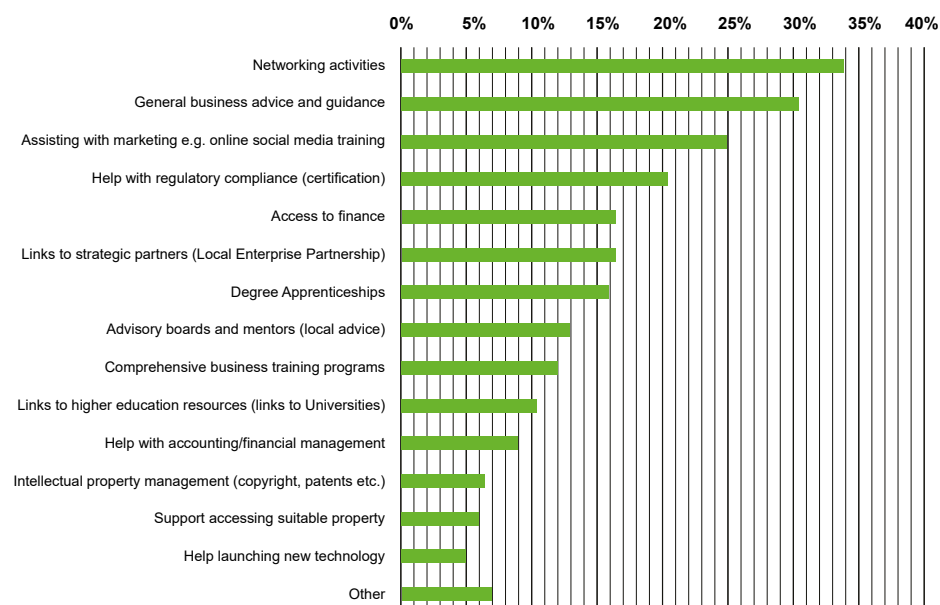


Figure 6: Business Support Needs

West Kent Partnership Programmes – The WKP is an economic partnership of the three West Kent local authorities: Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Malling, and Tunbridge Wells). The WKP is very well placed to deliver larger-scale business support programmes, through the pooling of resources (both staff and funding). Over the duration of this strategy WKP will deliver a number of key programmes, including the joint West Kent Business Support Programme, West Kent Rural Grants Scheme, and People and Skills projects delivered as part of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). In addition, the organisation has rebranded, and will be launching a new inward investment platform.

Networking - Within the borough there are a number of active networking groups, providing online and in-person events, where local businesses can seek advice and meet new clients and partners. The health of these groups is important to the development of micro and small businesses and the Council will seek to support their activities where possible.

Education & Training – Tunbridge Wells has a strong employment and skills base. Unemployment currently sits at 2.4%, higher than it was before Covid, but a considerable decrease from 2020-21 levels. As was the case pre-Covid, the unemployment rate is much lower than that of Kent as a whole (3.3%) and the UK (4.2%).

Figure 5 shows that difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff is often cited as a key barrier to business growth in the borough, especially in sectors such as Health and Social Care, Hospitality, Logistics and Retail. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council along with its West Kent neighbours has been working with Jobcentre Plus (DWP) and other organisations to develop employability initiatives across the area. These



The Amelia Scott

have included annual jobs and training events in Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Malling and Tunbridge Wells. In Tunbridge Wells recruitment events have also been held to target specific areas of the borough and groups of residents that have found accessing the jobs market more difficult.

National Vocational Qualification levels remain high with 49.4% of 16 – 64-year-old residents holding qualifications at Level 4 (degree level) and above. This is higher than the rest of Kent (38.5%) and the UK (43.6%). The borough is well served with primary and secondary schools. Further Education (FE) is available at the North Kent College Campus in Tonbridge town centre (which also offers some Higher Education (HE) courses. In addition, Canterbury Christ Church University has a facility in Royal Tunbridge Wells town centre, although the course provision is currently limited to the Salomons Institute for Applied Psychology. The Council is seeking to engage with both FE and HE providers to bring more opportunities to the borough. The Council recognises the need to support careers education and local opportunities for school leavers in Tunbridge Wells and will work with the Kent & Medway Careers Hub and Enterprise Advisor Network that have been established to build connections between local schools and the business community.

To identify demand for skills at a regional level, the Government commissioned a set of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs). LSIPs aim to bring employers and key stakeholders together to ensure that local provision is reflective of emerging skills demand. The Kent and Medway Local Skills Improvement Plan was prepared by Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce (KICC). KICC has worked with local authorities, employers and employer representative groups to publish a Plan that identifies local needs and solutions to



Gusta, Camden Road, Royal Tunbridge Wells

address them in our local sectors. It is hoped that the publication of the LSIP can be used to guide the provision offered by local universities, colleges and independent providers to align with gaps identified in the report.

The Council recognises the role that apprenticeships can play in boosting skills and meeting the staffing requirements of local businesses. However, it is recognised that small and medium sized businesses (SMEs) find it more difficult to take on apprentices. The Council will continue to work with partners to promote apprenticeships and other in-work training initiatives to support local recruitment and upskilling opportunities.

With resources allocated via the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the Council is developing proposals for employment and skills initiatives in Tunbridge Wells, for delivery in the financial year 2024/25. Gaps in current provision are being identified and detailed plans will be presented to local stakeholders later in 2023.

Town centres and local high streets

Town centres and local high streets are experiencing a period of rapid change. An evolution in usage, demand and identity is underway that has been exacerbated by the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. These trends mean that town centres and high streets previously dominated by retail, will need to diversify away from traditional models towards a mix of uses, with an emphasis on creating destinations to visit, live and work in.

There are a number of town centres and village high streets across the borough, including: Royal Tunbridge Wells, Cranbrook, Hawkhurst, Paddock Wood, Rusthall and Southborough; each with their

own identifiable character. The recently prepared Retail, Commercial, Leisure and Town Centre Study (updated in 2021) was commissioned in support of the new Tunbridge Wells Local Plan (Submission Local Plan 2021) and has provided recommendations to guide development within these areas.

The Study recognises the importance of Royal Tunbridge Wells as a regional centre serving a wide catchment area (489,762 people), well beyond the borough boundary. The town has a varied retail offer with well-known brands in the northern part of the town (in and around the Royal Victoria Place shopping centre which has recently been acquired by the Council) and a high concentration of independent retailers in the High Street, the Pantiles and also on Camden Road. The Study recommends a flexible approach to changes of use to enliven the town with leisure, cultural and community uses, as well as retail. New planning rules, including changes to permitted development rights and the creation of a new Class E – Commercial Uses Order of use is already accelerating change, providing both opportunities and threats to our urban centres.



Union Windmill, Cranbrook

Town Centre Plan – In the light of the above, the Council is now preparing a Town Centre Plan for Royal Tunbridge Wells to set out a vision and masterplan for the period up to 2040 and to allocate sites for future development. A series of early engagement events took place in October and November 2022 to discuss the future of the town centre with local people, businesses and other stakeholders and an evidence base is being prepared to support the preparation of the final Plan. While the Town Centre Plan is a longer-term, strategic document, the Council recognises that it is essential to also deliver shorter-term visible changes in the town centre to keep momentum going and to maintain support for the overall vision. There are a range of ‘quick win’ projects that could help to generate a sense of progress and interest in the town centre, and can be implemented by a variety of stakeholders to revitalise the area and create a more vibrant, active environment. Examples of these quick wins could include:

- Meanwhile uses/pop-up shops
- Markets
- Public Art installations
- Events & festivals

The first draft of the Town Centre Plan will be in the form of an Issues and Options consultation document that will be published late in 2023 for a minimum period of six weeks.

Royal Tunbridge Wells Together BID -

Following the initial formation of a Town Centre Partnership for Royal Tunbridge Wells in 2016, a ballot was held in 2018 on a proposed Business Improvement District. This led to the establishment of Royal Tunbridge Wells Together Business

Improvement District (BID) and since then, businesses have paid a levy based on the rateable value of their premises to the BID to be used for projects and initiatives to grow footfall and provide business support. RTWT has a voluntary Board of Directors from across the town that represents the various sectors located in Royal Tunbridge Wells. The BID’s office is currently located in a former retail unit on the High Street.

Recent projects delivered by RTWT BID include:

- Promotion and marketing programmes (at London termini and on bus backs) in collaboration with Visit Tunbridge Wells
- Installation of footfall counters across the town
- Improvements to the streetscene
- Provision of Christmas lighting
- Creation of new events to increase footfall including Art Week and Coronation celebration
- Grants for town centre events and cultural attractions
- A free training portal for levy-paying businesses
- Engagement with/lobbying the Council on town centre issues of concern to businesses

The BID is now approaching the end of its first five-year term and a renewal ballot will be held in February 2024. RTWT is preparing a new business plan for the proposed second term, with input from local businesses via consultation in Autumn 2023. The Council is represented on the BID Board and works closely with the BID on the many projects of common interest. The BID is also a key stakeholder in the preparation of the Town Centre Plan as described above.



Hawkhurst High Street

Local High Streets – Local high streets across the borough encapsulate the character of their communities, each holding a unique heritage, local retail and visitor offer. Many of the borough's Town and Parish Councils have chosen to prepare Neighbourhood Development Plans to guide new development within their area. The Council has also been supporting community-led projects, such as those funded through the current UKSPF Community Grants Programme.

The Creative Economy

Tunbridge Wells has very strong representation in the cultural and creative sector and the Council is keen to see the sector grow further. Work commissioned by TWBC and KCC in 2012 (and updated in 2019) provided a number of recommendations as to how the sector should be supported. As a result of this, in 2016, The House opened, providing flexible workspace for creative businesses. More recently the redevelopment of the existing Museum, Art Gallery, Tourist Information Centre, Library and Adult Education facilities into the Amelia Scott Cultural Centre has added a significant cultural venue and attraction to the borough.

In 2019 the Council secured funding from Arts Council England to set up a strategic partnership for the creative economy (known as a Cultural Compact). Creative Tunbridge Wells has recently been established and will be working with partners (including RTWT BID, KCC and the Amelia Scott Team) to increase the social and economic benefits of the creative economy for the borough. Further funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund will support the development of this partnership. Creative Tunbridge Wells will act as a cultural catalyst, working in partnership with business, voluntary groups, and the freelance community to build resilience within the sector and help it to thrive.

Creative Tunbridge Wells will take a leading role in cultural placemaking through meanwhile use initiatives and engagement with key strategic and planning documents including the Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan, Southborough Neighborhood Plan, and future plans for the RVP. It will seek to act as an advocate to ensure that the unique needs of the creative sector are realised in the development of town centres, including buildings, greenspaces, and infrastructure.

Visitor Economy

Tunbridge Wells is a beautiful borough, with a rich natural and built heritage, including many tourist attractions and hospitality businesses. The Visitor Economy continues to be integral to the overall vitality of the borough, both within our town centres and across our rural areas.

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in serious harm to hospitality and leisure businesses, as trade almost ceased entirely. Without government Covid grants, it is likely that many of these businesses would have faced permanent closure. However, recent research has signalled a recovery in the visitor economy since the end of the pandemic. The 2022 Economic Impact of Tourism Report (derived from the Cambridge Model) calculated that the value of the visitor economy in the borough was £256m, supporting 5,416 local jobs. There were 4.3m visitors to the borough in 2022, which was a 19.4% increase on 2021.

The value of the local visitor economy, local job opportunities and overall visitor numbers is set to increase towards and beyond pre-Covid levels. This is supported by projections and analysis from Visit Britain and Kent County Council, which both anticipate annual increases over the timeframe of this Strategy.

Visit Tunbridge Wells (VTW) – is the official tourist information and acting destination management organisation for the borough, working in collaboration with Visit Kent, Visit Britain and other key partners. A VTW Marketing Plan has been prepared recently and sets out five key objectives in order to promote the borough and attract new and repeat visitors:

- Market Royal Tunbridge Wells as a unique shopping and foodie destination and as a base for exploration of the whole borough
- Attract a younger audience of travellers, increasing footfall to leisure and hospitality businesses around the borough as well as cultural venues and events/festivals
- Uphold our Garden of England reputation, promoting our green spaces, footpaths and cycle routes
- Put Tunbridge Wells on the map to international travellers as a high-quality destination
- Cherish and promote our architectural heritage, including the many historic homes and gardens in the area

In order to achieve these objectives, the Council is focusing on a range of initiatives including: a refresh of the Visit Tunbridge Wells website, the printing and distribution of information leaflets and establishment of tourist information points at key locations across the borough, campaigns aimed at both UK and international audiences, building our VTW social media following and sector-specific business support through the new West Kent Business Hub.

Partnership working will be key to the recovery of the visitor economy and in realising our objectives. In this respect, real progress has been made since the preparation of the last Strategy and the



Illustrated map of Tunbridge Wells Borough

Council is now part of a number of partnerships to drive visitor numbers to the borough. This includes an increase in both internal and external connections with the opening of the new Amelia Scott cultural centre, deepened ties with Visit Kent, Visit England, WKP, RTWT BID, the National Trust and attractions and destinations across the borough.

Rural Economy

Tunbridge Wells is a largely rural borough, with a significant proportion of agricultural and forestry land. Much of the rural area is located within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) which is home to a diverse array of agricultural, horticultural, artisanal, manufacturing and tourism (including accommodation and hospitality) businesses.

Some rural enterprises in the borough have faced severe disruption as a result of the Covid pandemic and there have also been changes as a result of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. Challenges facing rural businesses identified in the Tunbridge Wells Business Survey include increased costs, access to finance and labour shortages.

The Council recognises the importance of rural businesses to the borough and seeks to ensure that businesses outside the main urban areas have equal access to the available support services.

Rural Grants – The Council is seeking to support businesses in rural areas of the borough to increase productivity and diversify where appropriate. Between 2006 and 2020, the Council worked with neighbouring councils Sevenoaks and Tonbridge & Malling to deliver the successful West Kent LEADER programme, with funding of over £1m awarded to rural businesses in the borough.



Jenny Huddart (Head Gardener), The Small Holding



Kino, Hawkhurst



Goudhurst Village



Sandhurst Vineyard

LEADER funding is no longer available, but the Council is now working with West Kent partners to deliver a Rural Grants Programme with its Rural England Prosperity Fund allocation. Building on the success of LEADER, this new programme will deliver £332,703 to rural businesses and communities in Tunbridge Wells (in the financial year 2024-25), with capital grants of up to £24,999.

Education, Skills and Innovation - The Council is committed to supporting skills provision and innovation activities to help rural businesses diversify, grow and invest in their future. To facilitate these activities the Council will seek to work with a range of local and national stakeholders, including DEFRA, further education colleges, rural support organisations and agricultural businesses.

Broadband - The 'Digital Exclusion in Tunbridge Wells' report (2021) analysed the state of digital connectivity across the borough. The report identified a number of challenges facing communities across Tunbridge Wells. There is a clear urban/rural divide between Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs), with urban LSOAs receiving an average broadband speed of 70.66Mbps and rural LSOAs receiving an average broadband speed of 40.10Mbps (the average broadband speed in the UK at the time of the report was 64 Mbps) as shown in Figure 8. These speeds are considerably lower than in the other West Kent districts. This has a considerable negative impact on rural businesses, with 50% reporting that they are having to use unsuitable and unreliable broadband according to a recent Federation of Small Businesses Study (2022).

To address these issues, Kent County Council is delivering the Government's Project Gigabit scheme, which aims to deliver superfast and 5G coverage to the whole of the county. Works are

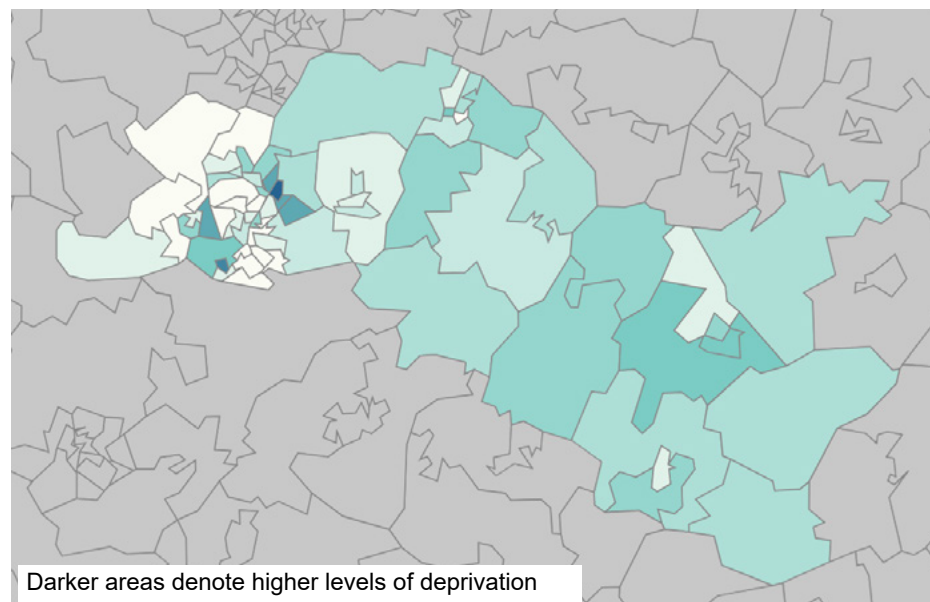
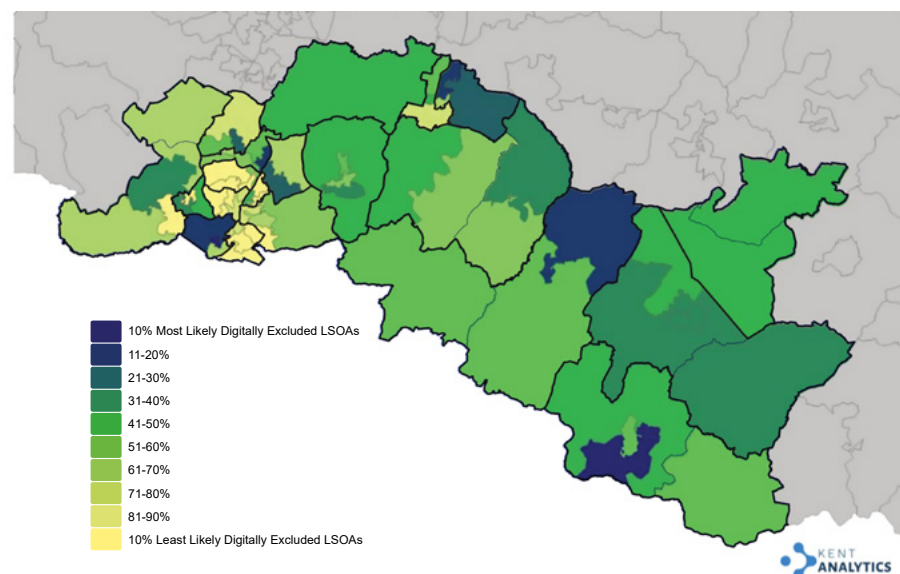


Figure 7. Geographic spread of deprivation in Tunbridge Wells – Multiple Indices of Deprivation (2019)



Source: Kent Analytics and other data sources^{3,6,8,9,10} (see 4.3)

Figure 8: Broadband connectivity across the borough

due to start in 2023 and will take place alongside free skills training and outreach from Digital Kent and the Government's Digital Skills Hub.

Engagement – the Council is committed to engaging and working with rural stakeholders to deliver positive results for rural businesses and communities. This includes recent work and funding for projects undertaken in partnership with Town and Parish Councils and Kent High Weald Partnership, the promotion of activities undertaken by Produced in Kent, and coordination with KCC and the Kent Rural Partnership.

Transport & Access

The following are the key concerns that businesses raise about transport and access in the borough: transport congestion, reductions in public transport services (particularly infrequent in rural areas), the lack of safe cycling and walking infrastructure, and the provision of appropriate parking provision for businesses and customers. The need to decarbonise the transport network is a key priority in the Council's emerging Climate Change Strategy & Action Plan.

Highways – Kent County Council (KCC) is the local highway authority for Tunbridge Wells borough. Therefore, all projects that have an impact on the highway (including footways) are either led by or delivered in agreement with Kent County Council. TWBC works in partnership with KCC at both a strategic level (e.g. in the preparation of the Tunbridge Wells Local Plan) and also on local schemes, for example the High Street parklets and planters schemes in Royal Tunbridge Wells town centre. KCC (with the support of TWBC) has also recently implemented a number of 20mph schemes in the town centre and surrounding residential areas, which have been widely supported by local residents. KCC



Bowl Water

is currently preparing its Local Transport Plan 5 which sets out their priorities for the network across Kent and the Council is engaging with KCC as this plan emerges.

Buses - Bus services in the borough are provided by a mix of large national companies and some much smaller local bus operators. Most bus services operate on a commercial basis with the remainder requiring local authority support (from Kent County Council). Commercial services tend to operate six or seven days a week, whilst supported services mostly operate on weekdays only. The largest local bus provider in the borough is Arriva Kent & Surrey. Vehicles used on the local network now include minibuses, full sized single-deck and double-deck vehicles.

Kent County Council's Public Transport Team works closely with local bus operators to seek to provide a good level of service for those living and working in the borough and in 2021 submitted its Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) to the Department for Transport, bidding for funding to deliver better services across the county. Whilst an award of funding was made, it is at a level that may assist in stabilising the current network but will not lead to a step-change in service improvements. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council is represented at the West Kent Enhanced Partnership Group and the borough also organises the more focused Tunbridge Wells Local Bus Partnership Group as well as the Tunbridge Wells Public Transport Forum (attended by rail and bus operators). A key issue identified at the Local Bus Partnership Group is the lack of layover (waiting) space for buses in Royal Tunbridge Wells town centre.



Mount Pleasant Road, Royal Tunbridge Wells

Rail – The borough has a number of railway stations that are critical to the local economy. These are at Royal Tunbridge Wells and High Brooms on the London-Hastings line, Paddock Wood on the London- Ashford-Folkestone/Dover line and the Medway Valley Line and Ashurst on the London-Uckfield line. Key issues that TWBC has lobbied with the rail operators on include improving access to stations on foot or bike and improving bus-rail interchange, as well as lobbying for flexible ticketing and better station facilities. At present services on the lines through the borough remain high frequency despite a fall in daily patronage since the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Council is also actively engaged in discussions to explore opportunities for improved connections to Gatwick and is supportive of the petition to begin a process for resuming HS1 services from Ebbsfleet and Ashford International stations.

Walking and Cycling – In 2018 Tunbridge Wells Borough Council commissioned the preparation of a Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP), that was subsequently published as part of the evidence base for the new Tunbridge Wells Local Plan. The LCWIP sets out a network of priority routes for pedestrians and cyclists into and around Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre and in the wider borough. The LCWIP will assist the Council in negotiating developer contributions for active travel infrastructure. The Council also works with KCC to bid for funding from Active Travel England's Capability Fund and Active Travel Fund to design and deliver improved infrastructure.



Bedgebury National Pinetum and Forest

Parking – Tunbridge Wells Borough Council owns 13 car parks in Royal Tunbridge Wells town centre and manages their operations. Work is underway to install electric vehicle charging in many of these car parks.

TWBC also undertakes on-street parking enforcement in the town centre. TWBC has partnered with Co-Wheels to establish a very successful car club in the town centre, with a recent expansion to eight vehicles across Royal Tunbridge Wells. A new borough Parking Strategy is being prepared at present.

Transport Projects – The table in Appendix E sets out a number of projects that are either being explored or are planned (depending on availability of funding) over the next 10 years. Immediate priorities are investigating cycle route links between Langton Green/Rusthall and Royal Tunbridge Wells town centre and consulting on local street improvements in the St Johns/St James area of Tunbridge Wells.



5. Economic Development Aims and Objectives

The overarching aims of this Economic Development Strategy are to:

- Support the development of a sustainable and inclusive net zero local economy - that delivers for local businesses and communities, respecting the natural environment and the architectural heritage in the borough.
- Work with partners to create a business support offer that provides the best opportunities to start, grow, and invest in businesses and destinations across the borough.
- Work with partners including Town & Parish Councils to create safe and vibrant towns and villages in the borough, where businesses and communities will thrive.

These aims will be delivered through focusing on five areas relating to the issues set out in the Context and Current Activity sections of this strategy:

- **Aiming for Net Zero**
Help businesses to decarbonise their operations and undertake adaptation and mitigation measures to become resilient to climate change.
- **Creating Destinations**
Work with partners to create town centres and high streets that are mixed use destinations for employment leisure, culture, retail and community use.
- **Encouraging Enterprise & Employment**
Support enterprise and business growth in the borough to provide employment opportunities to enable residents to live well in the borough.

- **Supporting Rural Businesses & Communities**

Develop and diversify our rural economy and build strong communities across the borough

- **Improving Sustainable Access & Connectivity**

Develop sustainable transport & digital networks to support the vitality and competitiveness of the local economy, recognising the need to meet net-zero ambitions and targets.

The Action Plan on the following pages sets out projects and initiatives for each of these focus areas.



Paddock Wood



Chapel Place, Royal Tunbridge Wells

Project/Service	Timescale	Delivery Partners
Aiming for Net Zero		
Create and share guidance with local businesses and stakeholders via the TWBC Climate website and other business communication channels on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retrofitting energy efficiencies for business premises • Renewable energy for business operations • Business travel planning • Supporting customers to adopt sustainable practices • Circular economy ideas/innovation 	Commenced and ongoing 2023 – 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTW Sustainability Forum • RTWT Business Improvement District (BID) • Invest West Kent • Kent County Council • Town & Parish Councils • Kent & Medway Growth Hub • Low Carbon Kent
Signposting to green grants and/or retrofit programmes to support SMEs (as available)	Commenced and ongoing 2023 – 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kent & Medway Growth Hub • Kent County Council • Central government • Low Carbon Kent
Support for Amplifi – network to promote sustainability and community objectives within businesses	Commenced and ongoing 2023 – 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borough businesses • RTWT BID
UKSPF funded pilot for last-mile delivery for goods in Royal Tunbridge Wells via e-cargo bikes	2024 – 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTWT BID • Town Centre businesses • UKSPF (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities – DLUHC)
Creating Destinations		
Visit Tunbridge Wells Marketing Plan - including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for provision of face to face tourism information at the Amelia Scott • Rebuild of Visit Tunbridge Wells website • Working to establish/develop marketing partnerships with Visit Kent, RTW BID and others • Campaigns targeting both local, UK and international audiences • Distribution of miniguide to key locations in Kent, Surrey, Sussex and London See further actions in Supporting Rural Businesses and Communities	Commenced and ongoing to 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amelia Scott • Town & Parish Councils • RTWT BID • Visit Kent • Local visitor economy businesses • Local press
Prepare Town Centre Plan for Royal Tunbridge Wells including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement with stakeholders • Preparation of Town Centre Evidence Base Study • Call for Sites • Preparation of Town Centre Plan including further consultation stages 	Commenced and ongoing to 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTWT BID • RTW Town Forum • Town centre businesses • KCC • Creative Tunbridge Wells

Project/Service	Timescale	Delivery Partners
Inward Investment Marketing Strategy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission Invest West Kent web portal • Develop Invest West Kent Marketing Plan • Partnership work with Locate in Kent • Contribute to annual Kent Property Market Review 2023 – 2025 	Commenced and ongoing to 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • West Kent Partners (TMBC and SDC) • Locate in Kent • Private sector developers • Local commercial agents • Local Press
Town Centre redevelopment/regeneration projects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Royal Victoria Place • Former Cinema site development • Former BHS unit back into use • Farmers Market in town centre 	Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private sector developers • Local businesses
ED issues considered in planning applications submitted to the Council	Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private sector developers • Parish & Town Councils
Royal Tunbridge Wells Together Business Improvement District (RTWT BID) including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare for renewal ballot in 2024 including new Business Plan • Deliver projects/initiatives in partnership including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business support and training • Streetscene projects • Promotion & Marketing • Events • Host Creative Tunbridge Wells Lead 	Commenced and ongoing to 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTWT BID • RTWT Levy Payers • Creative Tunbridge Wells • Amplifi • Local event organisers
Support for the Creative Economy including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up Creative Tunbridge Wells Partnership • Prepare Creative Economy Strategy for Tunbridge Wells • Create pipeline of investment opportunities • Address lack of affordable workspace • Embrace culture within Planning Strategies including Town Centre Plan • Increase usage of Southborough Civic Centre facility for cultural uses • Submit bid for ACE Place-Partnership Funding in 2024 	Commenced and on-going to 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kent County Council • Applause Rural Touring NPO • Tunbridge Wells Cultural Consortium • Amelia Scott • Local creative businesses • The House • Trinity Theatre • Arts Council England (ACE)
Encouraging Enterprise & Employment		
Business Portal set up on TWBC website including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signposting to all relevant TWBC Services • Signposting to Kent & Medway Growth Hub • Business e-newsletters and sign up option • Link to digital version of Business Welcome Pack 	Launched 2022, ongoing updates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business support organisations (e.g. FSB, Growth Hub)

Project/Service	Timescale	Delivery Partners
Business Communications to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly business e-newsletter • Social media comms – Twitter and Instagram • Regular news items in Council Resident's weekly newsletter • Quarterly items in Council's Local Magazine • Love Local Campaigns • Small Business Saturday Campaigns 	Commenced 2022 and ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local businesses • Other partner organisations
Develop Tunbridge Wells Business Welcome Pack: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare comprehensive information on relevant Council services for businesses • Collate relevant partner information • Review annually and update 	Launched in 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTWT BID • Amelia Scott • Kent County Council
UKSPF funded West Kent Business Support Programme including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up hub information portal • Business advice/mentoring programme • Micro-grant programmes • Training/networking events across West Kent 	Launched in 2023, ongoing to 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • West Kent Partners (Sevenoaks District Council and Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council) • Smarter Society (Contractor)
UKSPF - Develop People and Skills projects for Year 3	2024 – 25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • West Kent Partners (SDC and TMBC) • Jobcentre Plus (DWP) • Local support providers
Recruitment Events including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual West Kent event • Local area events in the borough 	Commenced and ongoing annual events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jobcentre Plus (DWP) • Invest West Kent (SDC, TMBC, TWBC)
Linking businesses and schools including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership work with Kent & Medway Careers Hub/Enterprise Adviser network • Promotion of apprenticeships to employers 	Commenced and ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest West Kent (TWBC, TMBC, SDC)
Working with Further Education and Higher Education providers to improved offer for borough residents including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Canterbury Christ Church University (Royal Tunbridge Wells Facility) • North Kent College (Tonbridge/Hadlow Campus) 	Commenced and ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tunbridge Wells Borough Council • North Kent College • Canterbury Christ Church University • University of Kent

Project/Service	Timescale	Delivery Partners
Supporting Rural Businesses & Communities		
Visit Tunbridge Wells Marketing Strategy including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop Tourist Information Points at locations across borough outside RTW • Miniguide distribution to accommodation/attractions and hospitality across the borough • Additional information on VTW website for rural areas including villages • Promote walking and cycling routes across the borough • Hold visitor economy networking events outside Royal Tunbridge Wells • Social media promotion for rural businesses • Commission map of borough for website and other use 	Commenced 2022, ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit Kent • Local attractions • Local accommodation providers • Kent High Weald Partnership • High Weald AONB • Parish & Town Councils • Explore Kent
UKSPF funded Rural Heritage Place-making project focused on local communities including projects in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hawkhurst • Sandhurst 	2023 – 24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amelia Scott • Parish Councils
West Kent Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) Grants Programme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formulate criteria and guidance • Arrange panel representation for Tunbridge Wells • Process applications and deliver funding 	2024 – 25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest West Kent (TWBC, TMBC, SDC) • Parish & Town Councils • Local Partnership Group (formerly ELAG) • Kent Rural Partnership (KCC)
Delivery of UKSPF Community Grants Fund to rural communities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare guidance documents and criteria • Process applications and deliver funding 	Commenced in 2022, ongoing to 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parish & Town Councils
Neighbourhood Development Plans prepared for rural communities	Commenced and ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parish & Town Councils
Partnership work with KCC on delivery of high-speed broadband	Commenced and ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kent County Council • Broadband suppliers • Parish & Town Councils
Assets of Community Value List (Community Right to Bid)	Commenced in 2012 and ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parish & Town Councils • Local community groups • Local residents (on electoral role)

Project/Service	Timescale	Delivery Partners
Improving Sustainable Access & Connectivity		
Support work on the new Tunbridge Wells Local Plan (Submission Local Plan 2021) including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transport evidence base prepared to support the plan including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan Tunbridge Wells Bus Study Transport modelling for borough Ongoing engagement with KCC on Local Transport Plan 5 Engage with Transport for the South East on regional Strategy/projects 	Commenced and ongoing to 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kent County Council National Highways Transport for the South East Active Travel England
Active Travel Projects including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better Streets pilot for St John's & St James' areas Design work for cycle route from Langton/Rusthall – RTW Town Centre across Commons Partnership with RTWT BID and KCC to upgrade the High Street scheme UKSPF streetscene projects in Royal Tunbridge Wells Engage with KCC on emerging Kent Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan	2022 – 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Kent County Council Active Travel England National Highways Bus operators Southeastern/Network Rail RTW Town Forum RTWT BID Town & Parish Councils
Develop sustainable transport project pipeline in readiness for bid opportunities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify pipeline of schemes for relevant funding Commission survey/design work Prepare and submit bids 	Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kent County Council National Highways Kent & Medway Economic Partnership Active Travel England
Work with public transport operators in the borough: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitation of Public Transport Forum Continuing involvement in Bus Service Improvement Plan Groups including West Kent Enhanced Partnership and Local Bus Focus Group Joint working with Southeastern and Network Rail on improving Stations Access for All scheme at High Brooms station Respond to consultations by transport operators to lobby for improvements Provision of bus shelters 	Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local bus operators Network Rail/Southeastern Kent County Council Borough Public Transport Forum JCDecaux
Parking facilities and services including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preparation of Borough Parking Strategy Improve signage to car and coach parking in Royal Tunbridge Wells (and elsewhere) Explore options for bus layover/waiting spaces in Royal Tunbridge Wells 	Commenced and ongoing to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kent County Council RTWT BID

6. Economic Development Action Plan and Economic Indicators Dashboard

Focus Area	Economic Indicator	Latest Data	Date	Source
Encouraging Enterprise and Employment	Number of PAYE Businesses	6,300	2023	Mid Kent Services
Encouraging Enterprise and Employment	3-Year Business Survival Rates (%)	91.4%	2021	Mid Kent Services
Encouraging Enterprise and Employment	Gross Value Added (GVA) per worker	£59,333.00	2021	ONS
Encouraging Enterprise and Employment	Median Gross Weekly Full-time Earnings (£) by Residence	£698.7	2021	KCC
Encouraging Enterprise and Employment	Median Gross Weekly Full-time Earnings (£) by Workplace	£577	2021	KCC
Encouraging Enterprise and Employment	Unemployment Rate (%)	2.4%	2023	KCC
Encouraging Enterprise and Employment	16-64-year-olds at National Vocational Qualification Level 4+	41.1%	2021	ONS
Encouraging Enterprise and Employment	Employees employed in the Knowledge Economy (%)	24.5%	2021	KCC
Aiming for Net Zero	Greenhouse Gas emissions from industry and commercial sectors (tCO2e)	65 KtCo2	2020	TWBC
Creating Destinations/Supporting Rural Businesses and Communities	Number of visitors per annum borough-wide	4,300,000	2022	Cambridge Model - Visit Kent
Creating Destinations	Monthly Average footfall in Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre (recorded by footfall counters)	5,918,980 per annum	2023	RTWT BID Footfall Counters (Springboard)
Creating Destinations	Visits to Visit Tunbridge Wells website	264,000 per annum	2023	TWBC
Creating Destinations	Social Media followers	14,317	2023	TWBC
Improving Sustainable Access and Connectivity/Supporting Rural Businesses and Communities	Average broadband speed	58.08Mbps	2021	Digital Kent

7. Approach to Monitoring

The Council will monitor the outcomes of the Strategy and the Action Plan. This monitoring will be undertaken to measure progress made towards the Aims and Objectives set out in Section 7.

These monitoring activities will be delivered in three ways:

- An annual review of the Action Plan will be carried out and a narrative report on projects included within the Plan will be provided.
- An annual review of the data included in the Economic Indicator Dashboard will be administered to provide a high-level picture of the performance of the local economy to benchmark against relevant comparison data.
- Bi-annual reports on the progress of UKSPF and REPF projects will be submitted to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.



The Amelia Scott and Town Hall, Royal Tunbridge Wells

Appendix A: Tunbridge Wells UKSPF Projects

UKSPF Interventions	Project Name	Allocated Budget	Match Funding	UKSPF Outputs	UKSPF Outcomes
E1: Improvements to town centres & high streets	Royal Tunbridge Wells Streetscene Improvements Project Lead: TWBC	Total: £100,000 (Y1) £15,000 (Y2) £35,000 (Y3) £50,000	Total £15,000 – RTWT BID (Y1) £15,000 (Y2) Possible BID match (Y3) Possible BID match	Amount of public realm created or improved = 3853 (m2)	Increased footfall = 5%
E3: Creation of and improvements to local green spaces	Sherwood Lakes Improvement Scheme Project Lead: Kent High Weald Partnership	Total: £20,000 (Y1) £20,000	No Match Funding	Amount of green or blue space created or improved = 9000 (m2)	Increased users of facilities/amenities = 10%
E6: Local arts, cultural, heritage & creative activities	Creative Tunbridge Wells Project Lead: TWBC	Total: £85,000 (Y1) £15,000 (Y2) £35,000 (Y3) £35,000	Total £23,800 from Art Council England (Y1) £9000 (Y2) £14,800	Number of organisations receiving non-financial support = 20 Number of local events or activities supported = 25	Number of community-led arts, cultural, heritage and creative programmes as a result of support = 2
	Rural Heritage Placemaking Project Lead: The Amelia Scott	Total: £70,000 (Y2) £35,000 (Y3) £35,000	TBC		
E9: Impactful volunteering and/or social action projects	Cranbrook & Sissinghurst Community Kitchen Project Lead: Cranbrook & Sissinghurst PC	Total: £17,000 (Y1) £17,000	Total £3600 (Y1) £3600	Number of volunteering opportunities supported = 10 Number of projects = 1	Volunteering numbers as a result of support 10

UKSPF Interventions	Project Name	Allocated Budget	Match Funding	UKSPF Outputs	UKSPF Outcomes
E10: Local sports facilities, tournaments, teams & leagues	Southborough Football Pitch Drainage Project Lead: Southborough Town Council	Total: £70,000 (Y3) £70,000	TBC	Number of facilities supported/created = 1	Increased users of facilities/amenities = 5%
E11: Capacity building & infrastructure support local groups	Community Grants Programme Project Lead: TWBC	Total: £58,500 (Y1) £19,420 (Y2) £23,000 (Y3) £16,080	Total – not known but project contributions likely from Parish & Town Councils	Number of organisations receiving grants = 10 Number of facilities supported/created = 3	Number of new or improved community facilities as a result of support = 3
E16: Open markets & town centre retail & service sector	Royal Tunbridge Wells Farmers Market Project Lead: TWBC	Total: £10,000 (Y2) £10,000	No match funding	Number of local markets supported = 1	Increased footfall = 10%
E17: Development & promotion of visitor economy	Visit Tunbridge Wells Marketing Programme Project Lead: TWBC	Total: £35,000 (Y1) £5,000 (Y2) £15,000 (Y3) £15,000	Total £33,000 from TWBC Economic Development (Y1) £11,000 (Y2) £11,000 (Y3) £11,000	Number of businesses receiving non-financial support = 525 Number of people reached = 325,000	Increased visitor numbers = 15%
E22: Enterprise infrastructure & employment / innovation sites	Vacant Commercial/Retail Unit Support Project Lead: TWBC	Total: £260,000 (Y3) £260,000	TBC	Number of commercial buildings developed or improved = 1 M2 of commercial buildings developed or improved = 4000m2	Jobs created = 20

UKSPF Interventions	Project Name	Allocated Budget	Match Funding	UKSPF Outputs	UKSPF Outcomes
E24: Training hubs, business support offers, incubators & accelerators	West Kent Business Support Scheme Project Lead: Invest West Kent (IWK)	Total: £54,500 (Y1) £4,500 (Y2) £25,000 (Y3) £25,000	Total £109,000 from SDC and TMBC (Invest West Kent) (Y1) £9000 (Y2) £50,000 (Y3) £50,000	Number of businesses receiving non-financial support = 20 Number of businesses receiving grants = 20	Number of early-stage firms which increase their revenue following support = 10
E29: Supporting decarbonisation & improving natural environment	Commercial E-Bike/E-Cargo Bike Scheme Project Lead: TWBC	Total: 25,000 (Y3) £25,000	TBC	Number of businesses receiving non-financial support = 10	Number of businesses adopting new to the firm technologies or processes = 10
E33: Employment support for economically inactive people	TBC	Total: £80,000 (Y3) £80,000	TBC	Number of socially excluded people accessing support = 25	Number of people engaged in job-searching following support = 200
E35: Enrichment & volunteering activities	TBC	Total: £75,000 (Y3) £75,000	TBC	Number of volunteering opportunities supported = 10	Number of people experiencing reduced structural barriers into employment and into skills provision = 50

Appendix B: Tunbridge Wells REPF Projects

REPF Interventions	Project Name	Allocated Budget	Match Funding	REPF Outcomes
2.2 Capital grant funding for investment in capacity building and infrastructure support for local civil society and community groups	Decarbonisation of the Weald Sports Centre	Total: £110,901 (Y2) £110,901	Funding from the Borough Council and SALIX Fund.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased perception of facilities or amenities (2.2) • Number of community energy projects funded (2.2)
1.1 Capital Grant Funding for Small Scale Investment in Micro and Small Enterprises in Rural Areas 1.3 Capital Grant Funding for Developing and Promoting the Visitor Economy 2.3 Capital Grant Funding for Creation and Improvements to Local Rural Green Spaces 2.4 Capital Grant Funding for Existing Cultural, Historic and Heritage Institutions that make up the Local Cultural Heritage Offer 2.6 Capital Grant Funding for Active Travel Enhancements in the Local Area. 2.7 Capital Grant Funding for Rural Circular Economy Projects	West Kent Rural Grants Scheme	Total: £ 332,703 (Y3) £332,703	50% match from applicants, reducing to 20% in extraordinary circumstances.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of businesses experiencing growth (1.1) • Number of businesses increasing their turnover (1.3) • Increased footfall (2.3) • Increased visitor numbers (2.4) • Increased perception of facilities or amenities (2.6) • Number of community-led programmes as a result of support (2.7)

Appendix C: Relevant Plans and Strategies

There are a number of plans and strategies emerging or already published that establish the context for this new Strategy. We are not seeking to duplicate these, but to make sure that there is alignment with the issues and actions set out in this Strategy.

- Building a Better Borough: Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Plan 2022-24 - TWBC
- Borough Climate Strategy 2023 – 2028 - TWBC
- Borough Cultural Strategy 2014 - 2024 – TWBC
- Borough Parking Strategy 2015 - 2026 – TWBC
- Borough Transport Strategy 2015 - 2026 – TWBC
- New Local Plan Submission/Site Allocations Development Plan Document: including
 - Settlement Role and Function Study 2017 and update in 2021
 - Economic Development Topic Paper 2021
 - Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells Economic Needs Study 2016
 - Tunbridge Wells Retail and Leisure Study (updated in 2022)
- Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Office Study (updated in 2022)
- Hotel Capacity Study 2017
- Retail, Commercial Leisure and Town Centre Use Study (updated in 2021)
- Tunbridge Wells Cultural and Creative Framework (2012 and 2019)
- HJA Evidence Base for TWBC Recovery Strategy (2022)
- Case for West Kent (2022) - IWK
- West Kent Priorities for Growth (2022) - IWK
- Economic Recovery and Renewal Strategy (2021) - SELEP
- Economic Recovery and Renewal Strategy (2021) - KMEP
- Council Strategy 2022-26 - KCC
- Local Transport Plan 4: Delivering Growth Without Gridlock 2016-2031 – KCC
- KCC Business Intelligence Reports
- Active Travel Strategy (2018 refresh) – KCC
- Economic Impact of Tourism, Tunbridge Wells 2022 – Visit Kent
- Visit Tunbridge Wells Marketing Plan Summary (2023)
- Local Skills Improvement Plan (2022) – KICC
- Transport Strategy for South East (2022) – TfSE
- Levelling Up White Paper (2021) – Government
- Skills for Jobs (2021) – Government
- Build Back Greener (2021) – Government
- Powering Up Britain: The Net Zero Growth Plan (2023) - Government
- UK Innovation Strategy (2021) -Government
- UK Digital Strategy (2022) - Government
- National AI Strategy (2021) - Government
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (2023) - Government
- National Disability Strategy (2021) – Government
- Alison Rose Review (2023) – NatWest
- Build Back Better (2021) – Government
- Spring Budget (2023) – Government
- UK Shared Prosperity Fund Prospectus (2022) – Government
- Rural England Prosperity Fund Prospectus (2022) – Government

Appendix D: List of partner organisations

Active Travel England	Kent and Medway Growth Hub	Seven Wonders of the Weald
Amplifi	Kent Apprenticeships	Sevenoaks Chamber of Commerce
Arts Council England	Kent County Council (KCC)	Southeastern Rail
Assembly Hall Theatre	Kent High Weald Partnership (KHWP)	The Amelia Scott Cultural Centre
Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU)	Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce	The Education People
Cultural Consortium	Kent District/Borough Councils	The Forum (cultural venue)
Creative Tunbridge Wells	Local Bus Operators	Town and Country Housing (TCH)
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)	Local Businesses	Town and Parish Councils
Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC)	Local Schools	Transport for the South East
Explore Kent	Locate in Kent (LIK)	Trinity Theatre
Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)	National Highways	Tonbridge & Tunbridge Wells Bicycle Users Group (TWBUG)
High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Unit	Network Rail	Royal Tunbridge Wells in Bloom
IMAGO	North Kent College (Tonbridge/Hadlow)	University of Kent
JC Decaux	Private Sector Developers	Visit England
Jobcentre Plus (DWP)	Produced in Kent	Visit Kent
Kent and Medway Economic Partnership (KMEP)	Royal Tunbridge Wells Together (RTWT) Business Improvement District	Invest West Kent
	Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum (residents)	West Kent Mind
	Safe Town Partnership (STP)	

Appendix E: Transport Projects

Project Summary	Timescale	Delivery
New cycle route between Langton Green/Rusthall and RTW town centre via the Commons (LCWIP Phase 1)	Design 2023 Delivery 2024-25	Funding for design work received as part of Capability Fund.
Improved A26 Cycle Route between RTW and Tonbridge Town Centre (LCWIP Phase 2)	Not known	Future Active Travel Fund Tranche S106 funding
A264 Pembury Road Cycle Route (LCWIP Phase 1)	Not known	Future Active Travel Fund Tranche s106 funding
Walking Route improvements into RTW town centre (LCWIP Phase 1)	Ongoing	KCC Maintenance Budget Future Active Travel Fund Tranche
Hawkenbury to Town Centre Cycle Route (LCWIP Phase 1)	Not known	Future Active Travel Fund Tranche s106 Funding
Expansion of Co-Wheels Car Club – increased number of vehicles	2023	s106 Funding
Increased number of EV Charging Points in Town Centre Car Parks	2023 – 2024	TWBC
Explore options for additional bus layover spaces in town centre	2023	TWBC KCC
Trial cargo bike scheme for business deliveries in town centre	2024 – 2025	UKSPF
Other Bus Service Improvement Plan Projects including: Exploration of options to provide Demand Responsive Transport services Lower fares and more flexible ticketing, electronic and smart card ticketing Better integration with other modes of transport including rail and active travel Modern comfortable vehicles with a move to zerocarbon vehicles Traffic management measures that will aid reliability of buses on the network Improvements to bus stop facilities including passenger information Improved information for passengers planning journeys	From 2023 – 2040	KCC Bus Service Improvement Plan
Improved pedestrian and cycle infrastructure on Mount Ephraim between Royal Chase and Grosvenor Road/A26 mini-roundabout	2023 – 2025	S106 Funding
Explore options for e-bike and/or e-scooter rental schemes in town centre	2023 – 2025	To be confirmed

Credits

Photographic credit, with thanks to: David Hodgkinson, Jonathan Buss, John McFarlane, Steve Fuller, Sarah Mott, Bewl Water, Sandhurst Vinyard, Salomons Estate, Steve Payne, Martin Bryant, Elaine Gill and Retirement Villages Group.