

Tunbridge Wells and the West Kent Economy

2009/10



**Overview and Scrutiny Review of the
Local Economy and Housing Select
Committee**





Chairman's Introduction

I am proud to introduce the Local Economy and Housing Select Committee's review of the West Kent and Tunbridge Wells economies, which recommends future actions and initiatives designed to encourage and support the local economy.

The financial events of recent years are well known to all and it is apt that the working group has investigated their effect and potential repercussions for the local economy at this time. The recommendations contained within

this report seek to strengthen Tunbridge Wells' economy while providing resilience for the future. Furthermore, the review looks forward to exciting new possibilities for the borough.

I would like to thank Councillors Chater, Stanyer and Woodward, as well as Daniel Bech who was co-opted from the Town Forum for this review, for their hard work and astute insights. I would also like to thank the Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Andrew Goy, and his predecessor Laurence Doig, for their support.

I commend the review to the Council and its partners and hope that the recommendations contained within are agreed as they will provide a great contribution to the prosperity and vibrancy of Tunbridge Wells and West Kent.

Councillor Beverly Palmer

Chairman of the Local Economy and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Select Committee

The Local Economy and Housing Select Committee

The Select Committee is responsible for scrutinising a range of services/areas, principally Economic Development, Transport, Housing and Planning.

For the municipal year 2008/09 the following Council Members sat on the Committee:

Beverly Palmer (Chairman)
Julian Stanyer (Vice-Chairman)
Ronen Basu
Marcella Callow
John Chater
June Crowhurst
David Neve
Brian Ransley
James Scholes
Chris Woodward

The Tunbridge Wells and the West Kent Economy Working Group comprises Councillors:

John Chater, Julian Stanyer and Chris Woodward
With the co-opted member Daniel Bech from the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum.

Acknowledgements

The Committee wishes to extend its thanks to everyone who participated in this review to help advise and inform the review. Particularly the Council's Head of Economic Development and Regeneration, David Candlin for steering the review at its inception and the Economic Development and Business Liaison Officer, Daryl Jones for the invitations to various meetings that allowed the review to gather further information on the higher education sector, the SEEDA Area Manager, Simon Richardson for his expertise, Kent County Council's Economic Development Manager, Jim McKenzie for his involvement in the review and Jack Malan and Mike Coyne from the Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services for sharing their findings and discussing the Working Group's ideas. Also thanks go to Esther van Hout from University of Kent for allowing us to be involved in various meetings with the Council.

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Definition of terms used in this report:

Region:	The South East of England
Sub-region:	West Kent, comprised of the boroughs of Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Malling and Tunbridge Wells
Local:	The borough of Tunbridge Wells

Executive Summary

A Local Economy and Housing Select Committee Working Group has conducted a review into the Tunbridge Wells and West Kent economies. Originally formed to investigate the opportunities for obtaining funding for initiatives from the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA), it became clear as the review progressed that SEEDA would not be in a position to provide future funding and so the review was refocused to examine the West Kent Partnership and the areas of potential growth for the Tunbridge Wells economy. The Working Group interviewed Officers from both Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and Kent County Council, as well as representatives from SEEDA and the Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services, who had undertaken a baseline examination of the West Kent economy on behalf of the West Kent Partnership. In addition to conducting interviews, a member of the Working Group attended the West Kent Partnership annual conference to participate in the formation of their West Kent Investment Strategy, which was scrutinised at draft stage by the Select Committee.

The Working Group found that external witnesses were unanimous on two points. The first was that Tunbridge Wells Borough Council should seek to integrate itself further into the West Kent Partnership, as the vast majority of interaction between SEEDA, Kent County Council and districts took place through the Partnership at sub-regional level. The second was that there were three key sectors with the potential for growth in the borough; the health, creative and higher education sectors. The development of the health and creative sectors would be highly reliant upon the development of the higher education sector. The Working Group was pleased to note that this assessment was shared by the Council's own Economic Development and Regeneration Service.

The conclusions for the review were based upon these interviews and a series of meetings with universities arranged by the Council's Economic Development and Business Liaison Officer and comprised the following key findings:

- Existing support for businesses is good, but not always taken advantage of by local businesses. Further support could be given to business start-ups, particularly with regard to identifying market opportunities;
- Tunbridge Wells Borough Council could do more to engage with the West Kent Partnership and there is an expectation for it do so held by SEEDA and Kent County Council;
- There are actions the Council could take to support and encourage the growth of key sectors in Tunbridge Wells; and
- The provision of higher education in Tunbridge Wells could provide an excellent foundation for future economic prosperity in the borough.

Recommendations

The Recommendations in this report have been grouped into themed sets, although there is some crossover between these. For convenience, the recommendations to each individual agency have been set out at the end of this report.

The Committee would like to make the following recommendations in relation to the Tunbridge Wells and West Kent economy:

Provide Practical Help for Businesses

Recommendation 1

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with the South East England Development Agency, West Kent Partnership and Kent County Council, utilise existing statistical data to maintain a comprehensive picture of growth opportunities for small enterprises and start-ups.

Recommendation 2

That the Council, in partnership with the West Kent Partnership and Business Link, investigate the most effective means of communicating market opportunities to prospective businesses and business start-ups.

Work with West Kent

Recommendation 3

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council seeks to strengthen its relationship with the West Kent Partnership by agreeing to a renewed West Kent focus and actively participating in the development and accomplishment of partnership action plans and strategies.

Recommendation 4

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council commits to driving forward and supporting a shared economic development resource to pursue economic development at a West Kent level.

Recommendation 5

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council examines the economic development function at Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council to establish the effectiveness of targeting economic development at sub-regional rather than borough level.

Recommendation 6

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council, pursues a West Kent wide function to consider all infrastructure issues, including housing and connectivity, and that future work in this area is pursued at this level.

Recommendation 7

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council representatives on the West Kent Partnership, including the Leader and Chief Executive, report to the relevant Select Committee on the status of the Partnership at regular intervals. Consideration should be given as to how the wider West Kent Partnership could best be scrutinised.

Support Growth Sectors in Tunbridge Wells

Recommendation 8

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with the West Kent Partnership, meets with representatives of the South East Health Technologies Alliance and Kent-based universities to discuss the commissioning of a cluster analysis report to examine the potential of the health sector in Tunbridge Wells and West Kent.

Recommendation 9

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council examines the approach of local authorities in Canterbury, Folkestone, Maidstone and Thanet to supporting the growth of creative clusters, with a view to establishing best practice.

Recommendation 10

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in consultation with the West Kent Partnership, Kent County Council and local businesses in the creative sector, consider the benefits of working with Meejahub and MediaTree and how each organisation can best support the creative sector in Tunbridge Wells.

Recommendation 11

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and the West Kent Partnership meet with the South East England Development Agency's Sector Development Team to gain greater understanding of how the health and creative sectors can be encouraged in West Kent.

Recommendation 12

That any strategy developed for the growth of economic sectors considers the impact of developments on the existing sectors of retail, the rural economy, leisure and tourism.

Recommendation 13

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with the West Kent Partnership, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council, develop and implement a strategy to revitalise the financial sector in West Kent.

Encourage Higher Education in Tunbridge Wells and West Kent

Recommendation 14

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council recognises the benefits of simultaneous growth in the health, creative and higher education sectors and, in partnership with the West Kent Partnership, develops both short and long term strategies to achieve this.

Recommendation 15

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council continues to support the work of the Economic Development and Business Liaison Officer in facilitating the expansion of Higher Education provision in the borough.

Recommendation 16

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and the West Kent Partnership recognise the benefits of Kent-based universities providing an Enterprise and Innovation Centre in West Kent and pursue this development with the universities. With this in mind, the themes in the West Kent Investment Strategy relating to the development of entrepreneurship, businesses, the labour force and the local skills base should be pursued, in part, through the provision of an Enterprise and Innovation Centre, or similar, supported by a Higher Education Provider.

1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1 At the beginning of the 2008/09 year when the Local Economy and Housing Select Committee was setting its work programme, it was decided that the Committee would review the way that the Council worked with the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) at one of its meetings. However, when the Area Manager of the SEEDA Kent and Medway Team, Simon Richardson, met with the Committee at its 2 April 2009 meeting, the Committee decided that more in-depth scrutiny was required and a working group was formed.
- 1.2 In a climate of economic decline, the Committee were concerned that the Council should raise its profile with SEEDA, strengthening partnership working between the two and increasing innovation in the borough. Following the 2 April 2009 Select Committee meeting a working group of Councillors Chater, Stanyer and Woodward and the co-opted member Daniel Bech, from the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum, were tasked with carrying out the review and proposing relevant partnership initiatives that would address the needs of businesses in the borough.
- 1.3 As the review progressed it became clear that the role of SEEDA was changing, with less focus on direct delivery and an increased strategic focus. Existing SEEDA funds were heavily committed up to March 2011 and existing programmes that did not fit the new agenda would not be replaced with successor programmes when they came to an end. In reaction to this change, the working group broadened its remit to examine the West Kent Partnership (WKP) with a view to establishing how Tunbridge Wells' economy would benefit from broader partnership working across West Kent.

South East England Development Agency

- 1.4 SEEDA is a government funded agency, in place since 1999, established to take responsibility for economic and social development of the South East. The agency aims to create a more prosperous region by helping businesses to compete more effectively. The recession and a redirection of Government funding led to a change of priorities for SEEDA, with a new focus on helping businesses through the recession and putting them in a strong position to take advantage of the eventual upturn.
- 1.5 SEEDA focuses on key South East economic sectors with high growth potential and innovation to maximise inward investment and international trade. These sectors are:
 - Advanced Engineering
 - Information and Communication Technology
 - Life Sciences and Health

- Financial Services
 - Environmental Technologies
 - Aerospace and Defence
- 1.6 SEEDA has four priority regeneration areas in Ashford, Hastings and Bexhill, Dover and Margate.
- 1.7 SEEDA's Regional Economic Strategy (RES) adopted a place-based focus, with eight 'Diamonds for investment and growth' to act as economic catalysts for the region as a whole. The eight diamonds are: Basingstoke, Brighton and Hove, Gatwick, Milton Keynes and Aylesbury Vale, Oxford and Central Oxfordshire, Reading, Thames Gateway and Urban South Hampshire. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council did not participate when regional discussions to establish the diamonds were underway and therefore missed the opportunity to be included.
- 1.8 The Implementation Plan attached to the RES divides the South East into three areas: Inner, Coastal and Rural and allocates specific focus to the Coastal and Inner areas. The Rural area doesn't have its own focus in the implementation plan and is viewed as 'cross-cutting'. Tunbridge Wells falls into this rural area. The Implementation Plan identifies that local authorities should share responsibility for delivering economic prosperity with SEEDA.
- 1.9 Business Link is a facility for businesses run on behalf of SEEDA. At the time of the review, SEEDA was tendering for a new contract for the provision of Business Link services for the South East for 2010-13, starting in April 2010. The Working Group was informed that the contract would have some refinements although the core functions supplied by Business Link would continue. Under the Government's Business Simplification Programme, publicly funded business support would be grouped under 30 products, available through Business Link as the primary access channel.

The Tunbridge Wells Economy

- 1.10 The Council's '*Vision 2026 – Enhancing the Quality of Life for All*'¹ document sets out the economic situation in Tunbridge Wells as heavily reliant on the service-sector with male full-time earnings below the South East Average. Although there has been some rise in unemployment due to the recession, unemployment levels have remained low. However, 19.7% of the working age population is economically inactive, 8.5% are benefits claimants and 14.5% of the population have a long-term illness.
- 1.11 The Local Futures Group document, '*The State of Tunbridge Wells, an Economic, Social and Environmental Audit of Tunbridge Wells*' identifies that Tunbridge Wells has a moderate economy in terms of scale, based on its share of national Gross Value Added (GVA) and employment. The study rates

¹ <http://www2.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/pdf/Vision2026final.pdf>

Tunbridge Wells' productivity as average, measured by a combination of average weekly earnings and GVA per head. Tunbridge Wells has a below-average business formation rate, but an above-average business survival rate. The study also states that Tunbridge Wells' skills and qualifications profile is about average, but notes that there is a skills polarisation in the borough, with an average share of residents holding qualifications of NVQ4 level or above but an above average share of residents at NVQ2 level or below, accounting for over a quarter of the resident population. 'Vision 2026' identifies that 30% of the population have low or no qualifications.

- 1.12 In Tunbridge Wells 60% of employment is in the rural area and this has increased over the last 20 years, partly due to rural businesses diversifying to utilise their outbuildings. Over 95% of businesses in Tunbridge Wells employ one to five people.
- 1.13 Tunbridge Wells faces significant challenges to future economic growth. Physical growth of business facilities and the increasing demand for housing are limited by a need to protect the built and natural environment. Transport infrastructure is also in need of improvement if new businesses are to be attracted to the borough. These limitations are recognised by the 'Vision 2026' document. 'The State of Tunbridge Wells' would add low levels of business, enterprise and human capital to the list of future challenges.
- 1.14 'Vision 2026' makes two key long term commitments to develop the Tunbridge Wells economy. The first is 'to maintain growth within Tunbridge Wells within 0.5% of the South East average annual GVA'. The second is to achieve 'developed business sectors and employment opportunities to reduce reliance on external employment markets thus reducing the requirement for commuting'.

West Kent and the West Kent Partnership

- 1.15 West Kent is traditionally affluent, but there is a risk of changes that may threaten that position, although there is no clear and definite statistical trend. There are three considerations that could lead to future changes:
- The recession is having an effect on the sub-regional economy, but it is difficult to see whether this will be merely a cyclical change that will right itself over time or a more long term, structural change.
 - Public investment is largely focused on other parts of Kent, diminishing some of West Kent's comparative advantages.
 - Value is largely brought into West Kent, rather than generated in West Kent.
- 1.16 From a limited survey undertaken on behalf of the West Kent Partnership (WKP), three positive aspects possessed by West Kent were identified:
- Housing and quality of life
 - Transport Links

- Business Support Services

Three negatives were:

- Availability of grants
- Cost of labour
- Availability of suitable sites

The area is losing its advantage of a short commute to London with the advent of the high speed rail link in East Kent, while Dover has committed to building 14,000 new houses. To react, West Kent needs to work on its positive and negative aspects. The Working Group was informed that WKP had identified areas for action in its forthcoming West Kent Investment Strategy, which included:

- A strategic focus on building indigenous entrepreneurship and existing local business.
- Improving West Kent's 'offer' so that advantage can be taken of the eventual market up-turn.
- Any action taken should not threaten the area's attractiveness and quality of life.

The labour and skills base in West Kent is acknowledged to be poor and a threat to the growth of the area. There are weaknesses in training and education that could be tackled to improve this issue.

- 1.17 West Kent has limited sites to take on larger projects; however, there is a trend that indicates the scale of projects is decreasing. In any case, demand is headed towards more specialised premises.
- 1.18 West Kent's rural economy has some strengths, in particular a national reputation for research and education facilities relating to this sector.
- 1.19 WKP used to be known as an 'Area Investment Partnership'. SEEDA established Area Investment Partnerships across the South East as a mechanism for the distribution of funding to priority sub-regional areas. When SEEDA established these partnerships in Kent, West Kent was not a priority area, as priority was determined by levels of deprivation. However, SEEDA has engaged with WKP, attending some meetings and providing some funding.
- 1.20 Structurally, WKP has a Board with officer support at operational level. The Partnership is formed of public, private, community and voluntary bodies including the Leaders and Chief Executives of the three West Kent districts. The Partnership addresses economic, housing and transport issues, identifying strategic action for lobbying and other interventions and, at the time of the review, was developing an investment strategy for West Kent.

Economic Development at Kent County Council

- 1.21 Kent County Council's (KCC) Regeneration and Economy Division sits under the Chief Executive, working at a strategic level across the County. The core economic development function is currently divided into three teams tackling tourism, rural economy and enterprise and development. The division's key purpose is to deal with regeneration and development in certain areas, with investment including Kings Hill and Manston Park, both considered to be of County-wide significance. Regeneration is focused on key areas of deprivation such as Thanet, Dover and Shepway. The Coastal zone is a KCC priority, but the growth of Kent Thames Gateway and Ashford are also considered to be of critical importance.
- 1.22 KCC's Regeneration Framework is a document designed to capture regeneration activity at a corporate level, co-ordinating the effort of all directorates. This cross-directorate management structure has been achieved through the establishment of a Regeneration Board which will co-ordinate regeneration budgets more effectively. The budget of the Regeneration Board is £1.5 million.
- 1.23 Other KCC initiatives include:
- Backing Kent Business Campaign: This campaign consists of ten commitments KCC have made to support businesses through the recession, including the payment of invoices within 20 days rather than 30 and the driving forward of the KCC £850 million capital programme which will support the Kent economy and businesses. KCC also want their tendering opportunities to go to Kent businesses as far as is possible within the tendering rules.
 - Backing Kent People Initiative: A people rather than business focus, KCC aims to establish a Kent-wide credit union to provide access to finance at fair rates.
 - Locate in Kent: Run and funded in large part by KCC, Locate in Kent aims to raise the profile of Kent as an investment opportunity for businesses.
- 1.24 There are 12 district councils in Kent and KCC Economic Development does not have the capacity to work individually with each. Co-operation is largely achieved by working through partnerships, such as WKP, both at a strategic and local level.

2. Objectives

2.1 As previously outlined, the original objective of the review, to establish opportunities for strengthening the partnership between Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and SEEDA, was reconsidered after it became clear that SEEDA's role was changing and that its existing funding was heavily committed. Following this, the Committee agreed that the Working Group would examine the Council's relationship to the West Kent Partnership and Tunbridge Wells' position in the West Kent economy.

2.2 The review aimed to meet the following Council Priorities:

Prosperous:

- Royal Tunbridge Wells will be the best town centre in the South East to live, work and visit, supported by thriving centres of Paddock Wood, Southborough and Cranbrook.
- The borough more generally will have enhanced its natural and built assets while planning for and accommodating future growth.
- The borough will have capitalised on the new PFI hospital at Pembury by using it as a hub to boost the health-based economy of the wider area.
- The borough will have used its designation as a Regional Hub to increase investment in infrastructure, such as roads and public transport.
- We will have increased local employment opportunities for our residents.
- We will ensure that people have access to training and educational opportunities to improve their skills whilst seeking employment or to aid their employment. In particular we will work with partners to develop the learning environment and prepare a flexible workforce for future opportunities.

Confident:

- The borough will be a place of opportunity – with high levels of educational attainment and skills, ease of access to a range of good quality employment and opportunities for independent living.

3. Methodology

- 3.1 The review working group gathered relevant information on the issues involved through Committee discussions with witnesses, smaller scale interviews with witnesses, desk based research and attendance at meetings hosted by the Economic Development and Business Liaison Officer.
- 3.2 At their meeting on 2 April 2009, the Committee interviewed the Area Manager of the SEEDA Kent and Medway team, Simon Richardson and the Head of Economic Development and Regeneration, David Candlin.
- 3.3 On 1 May 2009 the working group interviewed the Head of Economic Development and Regeneration, David Candlin, to discuss fruitful objectives for the review and to gain an understanding of the Council's involvement in the various issues.
- 3.4 On 28 May 2009, the working group interviewed Kent County Council's Economic Development Manager, Jim McKenzie, to establish the County Council's perspective on the West Kent Economy.
- 3.5 On 22 July 2009, the working group interviewed the Area Manager of the SEEDA Kent and Medway team, Simon Richardson.
- 3.6 On 8 October 2009, the working group interviewed Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services Partners, Jack Malan and Mike Coyne, to learn from their recent assessment of the West Kent Economy.
- 3.7 On 15 October 2009, Councillor Woodward attended the West Kent Partnership annual conference, 'Shaping the Future of the West Kent Economy', to contribute to the consideration of the draft West Kent Investment Strategy.
- 3.8 On 23 October 2009, the Overview and Scrutiny Officer attended a meeting between the Economic Development and Business Liaison Officer, Daryl Jones and the University of Kent Business Development Manager, Esther van Hout, to discuss the potential involvement of the university in Tunbridge Wells.
- 3.9 On 27 October 2009, Councillor Woodward and the Overview and Scrutiny Officer attended a meeting hosted by the Economic Development and Business Liaison Officer, Daryl Jones with Canterbury Christ Church University's Director of Centre for Enterprise, Audrey Songhurst and Head of Business Faculty, Tim Dee. The meeting was held to discuss potential activities for the university in Tunbridge Wells.
- 3.10 On 17 November 2009, the Overview and Scrutiny Officer attended a meeting between the Economic Development and Business Liaison Officer, Daryl

Jones and the University of Greenwich to discuss potential courses that the university could deliver to businesses in Tunbridge Wells.

- 3.11 On 26 November 2009, the Overview and Scrutiny Officer attended the Economy, Skills and Transport Group of Tunbridge Wells Community Partnership to discuss the working group's findings and view a presentation by Kent Business School.
- 3.12 At their meeting on 3 December 2009, the Committee scrutinised the draft West Kent Investment Strategy.
- 3.13 On 7 December 2009, Councillor Woodward and the Overview and Scrutiny Officer attended a meeting with the Economic Development and Business Liaison Officer, Daryl Jones, the University of Kent Business Development Manager, Esther van Hout, Kent Enterprise Manager, Louise Tucker and Kent Business School Head of Student Placement, Angela Ransley.

4. Working Group Findings

Practical Help for Businesses

- 4.1 The Working Group was keen to establish the support available to businesses in the borough, with particular regard to new start-ups. Members were concerned that it was difficult for small enterprises to identify gaps and opportunities for growth. To this end, the issue was raised with witnesses as a discussion point.
- 4.2 The primary access channel for business support is through Business Link. Business Link is essentially free for businesses, but does charge for the use of some services. It is a service offering assistance, not funding. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council has a memorandum of agreement with Business Link, for Business Link to provide a set number of business advice sessions each year. They are mainly held in the Gateway but have also been held in other locations, for example the Spa Hotel. Tunbridge Wells is the third council to sign a memorandum of agreement with Business Link, following Medway and Canterbury Councils. The Council supports Business Link by distributing information leaflets and providing businesses with access to an electronic newsletter. Unfortunately businesses often go straight to the bank for advice and don't always utilise the services that the Council and Business Link offer.
- 4.3 The Council's Economic Development and Business Liaison Officer identifies grants and funding opportunities that are imminent or in operation and shares this information with local businesses that could benefit from the sources of funding. SEEDA and Business Link also contact the Council to publicise new funding programmes when they become available. It is worth highlighting that funding programmes are aimed at businesses, not local authorities. The Council's role, therefore, is to inform businesses of the funding opportunities that are open to them. Witnesses were not optimistic about the availability of future funding schemes for businesses in West Kent, with particular regard to attracting funding from Europe. It was suggested that the future focus should be on joint working with the private sector, as successful, private sector led developments were the most hopeful source of funding.
- 4.4 Among other initiatives, the Council has taken part in the Kent Rural Towns programme, delivering the Healthcheck programme for Cranbrook, Paddock Wood and Hawkhurst. The Council also works with Kent Action for Rural Retailers, which is a partnership that provides advice to businesses to help village shops adapt to changing market conditions.
- 4.5 SEEDA has supported a range of services available to small businesses, including guidance, manufacturing advice services, improving the bottom line and diagnostic services. A sustainable skills academy is also being developed in partnership with KCC to create access to learning opportunities for workforces.

- 4.6 SEEDA and KCC hold statistical banks that could provide information on gaps and growth opportunities for small enterprises. The KCC research team could also help to identify opportunities in the local market. The Council would do well to take advantage of this information in developing its support to small enterprises and business start-ups.
- 4.7 The Working Group established that, while excellent work is being done to support businesses in the borough, existing opportunities could be further 'exposed' and exploited. This could be achieved through further support and facilities for networking, business incubation and specialised support for particular sectors. This need was further highlighted by the outcome of the business survey conducted by the Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services (CSES) between May 2009 and October 2009. A high proportion of firms surveyed in the West Kent area responded that they were thinking of relocating to another area. Witnesses from CSES confirmed that there is a perception among businesses that the focus in West Kent is on the public sector and that there is considerable uncertainty about the future. The need to support existing and prospective businesses through the previously outlined facilities underpins several of the recommendations made within this report.
- 4.8 Tunbridge Wells Borough Council should acknowledge the valuable contribution SEEDA has made to supporting economic activities in the Borough, particularly via Business Link and the Leader Programme. However, the Council should also accept that the focus for economic activity in the next decade is likely to be more sub-regional than regional.

Recommendation 1

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with the South East England Development Agency, West Kent Partnership and Kent County Council, utilise existing statistical data to maintain a comprehensive picture of growth opportunities for small enterprises and start-ups.

Recommendation 2

That the Council, in partnership with the West Kent Partnership and Business Link, investigate the most effective means of communicating market opportunities to prospective businesses and business start-ups.

Working with West Kent

- 4.9 At an early stage in the review it became clear to the Working Group that neither KCC nor SEEDA were prepared to work with the Council on a borough level. Due to the breadth of their activity, they work most effectively at sub-regional levels and in West Kent this is achieved through WKP. KCC see WKP as the delivery vehicle for initiatives and development as well as the dialogue link for the West Kent districts. This situation is not unique to West Kent.

- 4.10 Witnesses interviewed were emphatic that the Council should embrace WKP to realise the opportunities that are available. The case for investment and development is far stronger when pursued through WKP as it represents a sizeable chunk of the County; WKP has been successful in securing funding before, for example through the Leader programme. This is especially significant when it is taken into account that most funding programmes are regional, rather than divided by borough and county boundaries. If funding were to become available through KCC, Tunbridge Wells' chances of investment would be greater if bids were made through WKP. It is also inescapable that the fortunes of Tunbridge Wells' economy are intrinsically tied to those of West Kent's. The Council should therefore undertake to perform the vast majority of its economic development functions at a West Kent level, rather than at a more parochial borough level. This would not be unprecedented as Tunbridge and Malling Borough Council already view strategy and development of economic regeneration as the responsibility of WKP. Although this broader focus will inevitably be at the cost of some local independence, the Working Group considers that significant future developments will only be achievable if pursued at a West Kent level. To ensure that this direction receives appropriate political attention, the Working Group suggests that Council representatives on WKP, including the Leader and Chief Executive, report regularly to the appropriate Select Committee on WKP initiatives and Council involvement.
- 4.11 West Kent is seen by KCC as the 'economic engine of the county, which if ignored may falter to the whole County's detriment'. Nevertheless, KCC's concern is to 'oil' the engine, but with limited resources must target areas likely to have the biggest effect. KCC recognises that there is some evidence of 'faltering' in West Kent, but this is to be expected with the economic recession. KCC feel that new start-ups are needed to keep the West Kent economy going. To support this, KCC has looked at the provision of workspace developments in West Kent, of which KCC itself has two, based in Thameside and Folkestone. Some initial research was conducted by KCC with help from districts to identify the supply and demand situation in West Kent. At the time of the review, the Council's Economic Development and Business Liaison Officer was attempting to identify premises for small enterprises in the borough. As indicated previously, there is a trend for new projects to be moving away from large premises to smaller, specialised facilities.
- 4.12 At the time the review took place, WKP were in the process of compiling a West Kent Investment Strategy, which the Working Group was able to scrutinise in draft form. The Working Group welcomes the Strategy and its objectives and urges the Council to recognise and pursue the benefits it presents. The Working Group notes that Theme 9 in the draft Strategy suggests a shared economic development resource, to be allocated sufficient time to devote to working on joint initiatives. The Working Group supports this suggestion which could realise some of the objectives mentioned above and benefit the Council's budget. The Council has already shown itself to be open to partnership working; 'Vision 2026' identifies that 'partnership working will be key to meeting higher expectations and dealing with resource scarcity.' This

proposal would therefore sit well with the Council's desired working arrangements.

Recommendation 3

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council seeks to strengthen its relationship with the West Kent Partnership by agreeing to a renewed West Kent focus and actively participating in the development and accomplishment of partnership action plans and strategies.

Recommendation 4

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council commits to driving forward and supporting a shared economic development resource to pursue economic development at a West Kent level.

Recommendation 5

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council examines the economic development function of Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council to establish the effectiveness of targeting economic development at sub-regional rather than borough level.

Recommendation 6

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council, pursues a West Kent wide function to consider all infrastructure issues, including housing and connectivity, and that future work in this area is pursued at this level.

Recommendation 7

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council representatives on the West Kent Partnership, including the Leader and Chief Executive, report to the relevant Select Committee on the status of the Partnership at regular intervals. Consideration should be given as to how the wider West Kent Partnership could best be scrutinised.

Growth Sectors in Tunbridge Wells

4.13 'Vision 2026' makes a key commitment to 'develop business sectors and employment opportunities to reduce reliance on external employment markets thus reducing the requirement for commuting.' This objective was echoed by the advice of witnesses that the key to stimulating economic development in Tunbridge Wells would be to identify what is special about the area and to use that niche to draw appropriate businesses and professionals to the area. The Working Group was particularly concerned to investigate the business sectors with the most potential for growth in Tunbridge Wells, to further understand how the Council might realise that objective.

- 4.14 From the very inception of the review, the Working Group were advised by the Council's Head of Economic Development and Regeneration that the key potential growth sectors in Tunbridge Wells were the health and creative sectors, supported by an increased higher education presence. Happily, the witnesses interviewed by the Working Group were in unanimous agreement that these sectors presented the best opportunity for economic growth in Tunbridge Wells. Growth in these areas is supported by *Vision 2026*, the Local Strategic Partnership and the draft West Kent Investment Strategy. Health is also one of the six high value sectors identified by SEEDA as a focus for the South East region.
- 4.15 '*Vision 2026*' aims for the borough to have 'capitalised on the new PFI hospital at Pembury by using it as the hub to boost the health-based economy of the wider area' by 2026. While witnesses confirmed that the growth of the health sector was an obvious aim for the borough, notes of caution were sounded at the additional considerations this would entail. The absence of higher education and research facilities in the area was identified as a constraint on the growth of the health sector. In addition, the SEEDA Area Manager stressed that the opportunities and requirements for the secondary and tertiary support businesses in that sector would need thorough investigation. SEEDA funds Sector Consortia that encourage key sectors of the regional economy. The Consortia assist companies in their sector, identify market opportunities, and provide networking opportunities and strategic leadership. The Consortium focused on the health sector is the South East Health Technologies Alliance (SEHTA). The SEEDA Area Manager suggested that SEHTA could be of great help in examining the wider considerations for the growth of the sector in Tunbridge Wells. Upon further consultation, the Chief Executive Officer of SEHTA, suggested that a good first step would be to prepare a cluster analysis report for the area, including some benchmarking against other areas in the region, such as Surrey and Southampton, which could be undertaken by SEHTA. The presentation of such a report to a mini-conference of interested partners could be highly effective in launching a co-ordinated approach to growing the sector and raising the area's profile as a centre for the health-based economy. SEHTA expressed a desire to investigate the potential of telecare-remote delivery of health and social care services in the borough as this is a growing element of the sector. Given the generally held desire to encourage the presence of higher education in the borough, the Working Group considered that it would be effective to commission such a study from one of the Kent-based universities in partnership with SEHTA.
- 4.16 As the new Pembury Hospital forms the central focus of a growing health sector, so witnesses saw the presence of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in Tunbridge Wells as a basis for the growth of the creative sector. Witnesses from CSES pointed out that a number of cities in Europe have creative areas, where museums, theatres and similar institutions are linked and other industries are drawn in, for example software and advertising businesses. It was felt that something similar could be achieved in West Kent as there is evidence to suggest that there are creative people in the borough whose talents are currently engaged in London due to the networking opportunities available there. More opportunities of this type could be created

in West Kent to attract these professionals and make a thriving creative sector viable. KCC have had success in Maidstone growing this sector by bringing it together under 'MediaTree', an organisation developed to support the creative sector in Maidstone and wider Kent. MediaTree was started by KCC, Maidstone Borough Council, Business Link and the University of the Creative Arts (formerly Kent Institute of Art and Design who have a main campus in Maidstone) with a view to retaining the Maidstone Studios as a strategic asset for Kent and developing the wider creative sector. KCC's vision for such initiatives is for the private sector to see the value in developing a sector approach and to manage and fund the further development of MediaTree. At the time of the review, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council's Economic Development and Business Liaison Officer was working with Meejahub, a networking organisation developed by Tunbridge Wells based creative sector businesses, to further the interests of the creative sector in Tunbridge Wells. The Council would do well to consider how it can best support West Kent's creative sector and whether organisations like Meejahub, MediaTree and the BBC would be effective partners in that objective. There are emerging creative clusters in Folkestone, Thanet, Maidstone and Canterbury; it may be beneficial for the Council to examine the approaches taken by those local authorities in supporting those clusters and establishing some form of best practice. 'Vision 2026' aims for the Council to 'succeed in enabling Tunbridge Wells to be recognised as one of the major cultural destinations in the South East.' Attracting creative professionals to the area through a thriving creative sector would be an important step towards achieving this aim.

- 4.17 Witnesses saw that development of the creative sector would complement the development of the health sector well, although there was some suggestion that a focus on one specific sector may be more likely to stimulate economic development than a more thinly spread approach. The Council should consider the benefits of developing these sectors in conjunction with WKP and the Local Strategic Partnership. SEEDA is unlikely to be able to provide financial support for Tunbridge Wells to pursue the growth of a specific sector. There could however be opportunities to encourage inward investment and innovation by making use of existing regional services supported by SEEDA, including the Innovation and Growth Team, Locate in Kent and SEEDA's Sector Development Team. The Council would also have to work with KCC to ensure that there is not a conflict of interest with another area of Kent.
- 4.18 Members of the Working Group were keen to stress that any development should not be at the expense of existing sectors in Tunbridge Wells, such as retail, rural economy, leisure and tourism. The Working Group would stress the importance of the 'Vision 2026' commitment to 'Give our rural economy a competitive advantage', and considers that, in the light of Leader funding, a review of investment into the rural economy may be in order. The financial sector is also strong in Tunbridge Wells and West Kent as a whole and the Working Group felt that there could be scope for the Council and WKP to develop a strategy for revitalising the sector, which suffered at the hands of the recession.

Recommendation 8

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with the West Kent Partnership, meets with representatives of the South East Health Technologies Alliance and Kent-based universities to discuss the commissioning of a cluster analysis report to examine the potential of the health sector in Tunbridge Wells and West Kent.

Recommendation 9

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council examines the approach of local authorities in Canterbury, Folkestone, Maidstone and Thanet to supporting the growth of creative clusters, with a view to establishing best practice.

Recommendation 10

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in consultation with the West Kent Partnership, Kent County Council and local businesses in the creative sector, consider the benefits of working with Meejahub and MediaTree and how each organisation can best support the creative sector in Tunbridge Wells.

Recommendation 11

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and the West Kent Partnership meet with the South East England Development Agency's Sector Development Team to gain greater understanding of how the health and creative sectors can be encouraged in West Kent.

Recommendation 12

That any strategy developed for the growth of economic sectors considers the impact of developments on the existing sectors of retail, the rural economy, leisure and tourism.

Recommendation 13

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with the West Kent Partnership, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council, develop and implement a strategy to revitalise the financial sector in West Kent.

Higher Education in Tunbridge Wells and West Kent

- 4.19 Both the draft West Kent Investment Strategy and '*Vision 2026*' stress the need to develop better access to education and skills in the area. '*Vision 2026*' focuses on two strands in particular: the access to lifelong learning for all residents and the provision of training and education to improve employment skills, preparing a flexible workforce for future opportunities. The presence of a higher education (HE) provider in Tunbridge Wells would enable the Council to meet these objectives, but there would be additional benefits to such a presence. It is recognised by the Council that a large

number of those finishing school leave the borough to go to university and don't return after graduating. It is the Working Group's belief that the presence of an HE provider in Tunbridge Wells would encourage the growth of infrastructure and economic sectors attractive to students – this same infrastructure would be highly attractive to the graduates and professionals required to launch and sustain the economic sectors previously discussed in this report. As previously mentioned, the health sector is particularly reliant upon the research provided by HE institutions. Witnesses consulted by the Working Group agreed that the simultaneous growth of the health, creative and HE sectors was highly complementary and a strategy achieving this simultaneous growth would be fruitful.

- 4.20 At the time of the review, the Council's Economic Development and Business Liaison Officer invited the Working Group to participate in a series of meetings held with the Kent-based universities: The University of Kent, Canterbury Christ Church University and Greenwich University. All three universities expressed a desire to increase their presence in West Kent and saw the provision of courses to businesses as an effective approach to establishing a presence in the area. The Working Group welcomes these developments and commends the Economic Development and Business Liaison Officer's work in developing these proposals and liaising with local businesses to progress the initiatives.
- 4.21 Further to delivering courses to businesses in West Kent, Canterbury Christ Church University and the University of Kent were exploring proposals for further business support and development through Enterprise and Innovation Centres. Both institutions have centres in other parts of Kent, operating in slightly different ways, but essentially offering a promotional hub for businesses and a gateway to the knowledge base of the university. There is also potential for consultancy, student placements, funding opportunities, professional development, incubation and start-up support at these centres. The Working Group believes that a number of the aims in the draft West Kent Investment Strategy could be met through an Enterprise and Innovation Centre, particularly with regard to business incubation and specialised support for sector development. The development of a centre would be an excellent foundation for the further growth of HE in West Kent as the university builds links with local businesses and institutions, and sectors complementing the university's work develop. Further to this it would provide a base for the delivery of training and education to improve local employment skills and an excellent opportunity to encourage innovation in local businesses. With this in mind, the Working Group believes that the presence of the Salomons Centre in the borough represents an opportunity not to be missed and the Council would do well to work with Canterbury Christ Church University to ensure that the site provides maximum value to the local community.

Recommendation 14

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council recognises the benefits of simultaneous growth in the health, creative and higher education sectors and, in partnership with the West Kent Partnership, develops both short and long term strategies to achieve this.

Recommendation 15

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council continues to support the work of the Economic Development and Business Liaison Officer in facilitating the expansion of Higher Education provision in the borough.

Recommendation 16

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and the West Kent Partnership recognise the benefits of Kent-based universities providing an Enterprise and Innovation Centre in West Kent and pursue this development with the universities. With this in mind, the themes in the West Kent Investment Strategy relating to the development of entrepreneurship, businesses, the labour force and the local skills base should be pursued, in part, through the provision of an Enterprise and Innovation Centre, or similar, supported by a Higher Education Provider.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 The Working Group has been extremely satisfied to see that the Council's Economic Development and Regeneration Service is clearly aware of the priorities and potential growth in Tunbridge Wells. Given that witnesses unanimously agreed with the Service's initial assessment that the priorities for growth in Tunbridge Wells were the health, creative and higher education sectors, the Working Group has no trouble in recommending that the Council continues to pursue development in these areas.
- 5.2 The Working Group strongly believes that for this agenda to bear fruit the Council must engage further with the West Kent Partnership. The Council's current involvement in the partnership and participation in the development of the West Kent Investment Strategy is encouraging, but further moves to refocus the Council's economic development activity to a West Kent level are necessary if Tunbridge Wells is to gain recognition at a county level and beyond. To this end, the Council needs to consider how Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells can work together as regional hubs; witnesses suggested a common arrangement in their local development frameworks as a way forward and this should be given due consideration.
- 5.3 Development of the Higher Education sector in Tunbridge Wells seems key to realising the Council's ambitions for the borough. Not only does the sector provide economic activity in its own right, it contributes to existing sectors by bringing in students and professionals from outside the borough, provides education opportunities to residents and develops the local economy through enterprise and innovation activities. The Working Group believes that the Council should pursue the further development of Higher Education as a priority for future economic prosperity.
- 5.4 Although it is disappointing that the Council is unlikely to access funding from SEEDA in the future, several services are still provided by SEEDA that the Council should look to make the most of, such as the Innovation and Growth Teams, Sector Development Teams and the appropriate Sector Consortia. If the health sector can be encouraged in Tunbridge Wells, the Council should look to how SEEDA's focus on the sector can be further utilised in this initiative.
- 5.5 '*Vision 2026*' identifies that the population of the borough is aging and predicts that this will place significant pressure on the economy. It is acknowledged that significant numbers of retired and semi-retired residents in the borough have extensive business experience and the Council would do well to

consider how this resource can be utilised to allow these residents to become economically active.

- 5.6 The Working Group acknowledges the contributions to the development of the local economy of the various institutions working in West Kent and it is testament to their effective work that the area has not suffered more in the recession than it already has. The Working Group hopes that its recommendations will contribute to further discussion, closer working between agencies and a prosperous economic future for the residents of Tunbridge Wells and the wider area.

Abbreviations used in this report:

BBC:	British Broadcasting Corporation
CSES:	Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services
GVA:	Gross Value Added
HE:	Higher Education
KCC:	Kent County Council
NVQ:	National Vocational Qualification
PFI:	Private Finance Initiative
RES:	Regional Economic Strategy
SEEDA:	South East England Development Agency
SEHTA:	South East Health Technologies Alliance
WKP:	The West Kent Partnership

Recommendations set out by Agency

For convenience, the recommendations made to each agency are set out below:

Recommendations made to Business Link

Recommendation 2

That the Council, in partnership with the West Kent Partnership and Business Link, investigate the most effective means of communicating market opportunities to prospective businesses and business start-ups.

Recommendations made to Kent County Council

Recommendation 1

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with the South East England Development Agency, West Kent Partnership and Kent County Council, utilise existing statistical data to maintain a comprehensive picture of growth opportunities for small enterprises and start-ups.

Recommendations made to Sevenoaks District Council

Recommendation 6

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council, pursues a West Kent wide function to consider all infrastructure issues, including housing and connectivity, and that future work in this area is pursued at this level.

Recommendation 13

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with the West Kent Partnership, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council, develop and implement a strategy to revitalise the financial sector in West Kent.

Recommendations made to the South East England Development Agency

Recommendation 1

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with the South East England Development Agency, West Kent Partnership and Kent County Council, utilise existing statistical data to maintain a comprehensive picture of growth opportunities for small enterprises and start-ups.

Recommendations made to Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council

Recommendation 6

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council, pursues a West Kent wide function to consider all infrastructure issues, including housing and connectivity, and that future work in this area is pursued at this level.

Recommendation 13

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Recommendations made to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

Recommendation 1

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with the South East England Development Agency, West Kent Partnership and Kent County Council, utilise existing statistical data to maintain a comprehensive picture of growth opportunities for small enterprises and start-ups.

Recommendation 2

That the Council, in partnership with the West Kent Partnership and Business Link, investigate the most effective means of communicating market opportunities to prospective businesses and business start-ups.

Recommendation 3

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council seeks to strengthen its relationship with the West Kent Partnership by agreeing to a renewed West Kent focus and actively

participating in the development and accomplishment of partnership action plans and strategies.

Recommendation 4

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council commits to driving forward and supporting a shared economic development resource to pursue economic development at a West Kent level.

Recommendation 5

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council examines the economic development function of Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council to establish the effectiveness of targeting economic development at sub-regional rather than borough level.

Recommendation 6

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council, pursues a West Kent wide function to consider all infrastructure issues, including housing and connectivity, and that future work in this area is pursued at this level.

Recommendation 7

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council representatives on the West Kent Partnership, including the Leader and Chief Executive, report to the relevant Select Committee on the status of the Partnership at regular intervals. Consideration should be given as to how the wider West Kent Partnership could best be scrutinised.

Recommendation 8

That Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, in partnership with the West Kent Partnership, meets with representatives of the South East Health Technologies Alliance and Kent-based universities to discuss the commissioning of a cluster analysis report to examine the potential of the health sector in Tunbridge Wells and West Kent.

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consider the benefits of working with Meejahub and MediaTree and how each organisation can best support the creative sector in Tunbridge Wells.

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Recommendations made to the West Kent Partnership

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