

Tunbridge Wells and the West Kent Economy Review Report

To: Town Forum - 22 April 2010

Author of report: Local Economy and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Select Committee

Background/Introduction

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.

Route to Implementation:

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council's Cabinet has been asked to approve the recommendations in the report and will consider them on 29 April 2010. The review has also been sent to Business Link, Kent County Council, Sevenoaks District Council, The South East England Development Agency, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and the West Kent Partnership to seek responses to the recommendations made.

This report is for the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum's information.

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Appendix 1: Local Economy and Housing Select Committee Tunbridge Wells and the West Kent Economy Review