

Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce
Ashford Economic Development Group

Minutes of an ordinary meeting of the AEDG held at Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce on 15th May 2025 at 8.30am.

PRESENT	NAME	POSITION
	Susan Bonett (SB)	
	Jo Brown (JB)	
	Nettie Buss (AB)	Chair
	Maria Callow (MC)	
	Lee Collette (LC)	
	Steve Garnett SG)	
	Katie Hodson (KH)	
	James McComas (JM)	
	Andrew Osborne (AO)	
	Jason Rainbird (JR)	
	Tim Sheppard (TS)	
	Dan Sherlock (DS)	
	Richard Stafford (RS)	
	Pete Tomsett (PT)	
APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE RECEIVED FROM	Peter Heritage (PH) Richard Lloyd (RLL) Tudor Price (TP) Tom Shaw-Dunn (TS-D)	

1. NOTICE AND QUORUM

The chair reported that enough notice of the meeting had been duly given and that a quorum was present. The chair declared that the meeting was open at 8.30am.

2. APPROVAL OF PRIOR MINUTES

Minutes of the board meeting held on 17th April 2025 had already been approved. The chair had been authorised to sign them as a complete record of the relevant meeting.

3. ANY MATTERS ARISING/PREVIOUS MEETING

Still need to agree a date to feed into the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) and invite Camilla Maurice, LSIP Project Manager to a future AEDG meeting.

4. BUSINESS OF THE MEETING

DEVOLUTION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

AO reported on the changes locally and across Kent in relation to the KCC elections and said that it was not clear whether this would present any changes in approach to the three or four new unitary council options set out earlier this year.

EUROSTAR UPDATE

AO updated there is a Eurostar Partner meeting next week. Evolyn (the potential Italian operator) is progressing well. **TP** is still exploring the opportunity to run a campaign to support the ongoing ABC Bring Back Eurostar video campaign.

AO shared London St Pancras High Speed are exploring offering incentives for operators to get new trains on track, offer new destinations and new intermediaries (Ashford and Ebbsfleet) with the aim to generate greater passenger activity.

UPDATE ON ASHFORD COLLEGE

SB shared student waiting list numbers for Ashford College are a challenge. **EKC** is exploring bringing forward new sites close by. A potential site could be on Station Road near the memorial gardens. Apprentice delivery is moving from Elwick Road to Wooton Road.

SB will be consulting on the future strategic plan and vision which will have four to five strands. **SB** would value feedback on the college's proposed strategic priorities from the AEDG.

SB mentioned there is a strategic marketing campaign to raise awareness around the need for adult provision. **JB** requested support from the AEDG to do student mock interviews.

KH asked if the challenge around vacancies was across the board. Ashford College is popular due to its good outcomes so broadly it is across the board.

AO mentioned he had a meeting with the local Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). There is a focus to get more 16-24 year olds into employment. There are skills gaps in manufacturing and hospitality. **AO** suggested to invite a DWP representative to a future meeting, this was agreed. **SB** and **AO** will collaborate.

JM added the DWP held an event for hospitality recruitment and this was successful. **DS** asked if there was potential to use empty retail space to accommodate students. **AO** mentioned the options are to get as close as possible to the existing college. However, **SB** added creative learning does work well off site.

SB finally added the college is looking for a new principal. **SB** will be joining Morley College London as the new Principal and Chief Executive in the summer 2025. **AO** thanked **SB** for her outstanding work and how we are all indebted to her and her team.

KiCC MEMBERSHIP

AB reminded the AEDG of the importance to increase the number of KiCC members and that we all can play a role in supporting that. **KH** offered the AEDG a speaking slot at the next Azets Business Breakfast on 20th June to attract new members to the KiCC. **JR** recommended setting

up a AEDG LinkedIn group. **PT** said he would share with his contacts.

MC recommended sharing the membership recruitment idea with Inside Kent (Sideways Media), **AB** suggested Business South East – potentially inviting them to a future AEDG meeting.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

RS updated on the success of commercial lettings; he has sold more freeholds than the previous 24 months. Residential investors are considering commercial opportunities. Retail outlook is still poor, Industrial is going well, but Stodmarsh is still causing problems.

PT updated in the banking world there is a big slowdown in residential mortgage enquires. The Bank of England recently reduced the base rate to 4.25%. Plus there are more money laundering controls put in place.

LC shared the Ashford Designer Outlet trade is up, 49% footfall is from outside Kent. There are plans to install a Ferris wheel from July to December 2025.

JM reported the weather has helped to open up the hospitality industry. Residential and travel occupancy is going up at Eastwell Manor. Yet a lot of operators are still under pressure. The Cave has opened a restaurant in Eureka Park.

JB mentioned the Ashford College end of year art show will be displayed at the Outlet from 23rd– 29th June. She also said the Coding Institute is offering an AI course for small businesses.

6. CLOSE

AB thanked AEDG members for their continued support.

Date of next meeting - 8.30am, 19th June 2025.

There was no further business and therefore the chair declared that the meeting was closed at 9.45am.

.....Chair – Nettie Buss - Date