

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 19th June 2025 at 8.30am.

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

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 15th May 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

Matters discussed in AOB.

4. BUSINESS OF THE MEETING

Rob Polden (**RP**), Operations Lead for Job Centre DWP and Lucy Clark (**LAC**), new Principal at Ashford College were welcomed by **AB**. **TS-D** shared he has new roles as Head of

Decarbonisation Programme for the Church of England and is working for the Rolls Royce SMR factory.

ROB POLDEN - DWP

AO invited **RP** to attend. **RP** shared there is a new Government white paper 'Get Britain Working' encouraging people back to work with a focus on sector based academies, work experience, work trials, apprenticeships and support for those with health conditions.

RP wants to get ahead of skills needs in Ashford and mentioned the 'Connect to Work' programme which focuses on people returning to work. There are skills bootcamps and **RP** is keen to know what employers need and he also wants to encourage internal progression of employees within local businesses.

AB asked who identifies skills gaps, **TP** mentioned the LSIP determines where there are gaps in Kent and Medway. **AO** mentioned that there are consistent skills gaps in care and hospitality and there is a mismatch in skills with employees and employers.

TS-D mentioned the importance of DWP looking ahead of what employees want too – **RP** agreed there is an education piece to fulfil. AI is also moving at pace. **AO** also mentioned that Aldi and the new David Lloyd leisure centre will be recruiting in the future in Ashford.

JR asked if the DWP track data gaps, **RP** said they do to identify gaps for transport and childcare barriers, there are still skills gaps. **KH** asked if they have employer contacts for work experience, **RP** said they have a register of employers.

TP said there is a shortage in labour force but there are a number of programmes in the pipeline and there are still challenges for SMEs who don't have time to offer work experience. **RP** mentioned they have coaches to support young people to learn soft skills.

LAC mentioned they are keen to initiate employer workshops with students to encourage soft skills and resilience. **PH** endorsed the need to teach soft skills.

UPDATE ON ASHFORD COLLEGE

LAC shared student waiting list numbers for Ashford College are increasing. **TP** concurred Mid-Kent college is oversubscribed too. **LAC** confirmed she will liaise with the AEDG when the college's proposed strategic priorities are agreed.

EUROSTAR UPDATE

TP shared the new Eurostar group chair is Vince Lucas, and Gemini is engaging well. There has been a suggestion that operators want a 'pay as you go' when they visit Ebbsfleet and Ashford. The group is looking at the viability of a CAM complaint about anti-competitive practices, this is still work in progress. **TP** advised there are still discussions about Farthinglow Truck Stop.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

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.

AB will contact **RLL** about attending AEDG. **TP** will contact Katie Lam MP and Sojan Joseph to attend the AEDG separately. **AB** mentioned there is a Wine Garden of England event in

Ashford on 27th June, **PH** said McArthur Glen is sponsoring the Ashford Food and Drink Festival.

TS-D mentioned the consultation at Dungeness about SMR's is unlikely to proceed due to Natural England concerns. **TP** reported the Lower Thames Crossing has been signed off and the Dartford Crossing fees will go up. **TP** also said the Chamber awards has opened.

TP also said the Chamber is involved in a Maritime Short Straits Cluster partnering initiative with The Port of Dover to support skills development.

KH asked if there is any progress with an Agri representative on AEDG, **AB** will look into this.

6. CLOSE

AB thanked AEDG members for their continued support.

Date of next meeting - 8.30am, 17th July 2025.

There was no further business and therefore the chair declared that the meeting was closed at 9.33am.

.....Chair – Nettie Buss - Date