

KENT INVICTA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
EAST KENT ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GROUP (EKEDG)

Wednesday 26th November 2025

The Voco Hotel, Folkestone

1. Welcome and Apologies

Members Present:

Ray Johnson (RJ) – Chair
Tudor Price (TP) – KICC
Daniel Sansuisepe (DS)– Castlewood Hotels
Philip Clapham (PC) - Smith Woolley
Susan Berdo (SB) – KCC
Ella Sandall (ES)– Jenner

Apologies:

Lindsey Biggs (LB) – EKC Group
Richard Christian (RC) – Port of Dover
Mathew Arnold (MA) – Bayliss
Nicola Wood (NW) - Thanet District Council
Jayne Miles (JM) – Dover District Council
Steve Wisbey (SW) – NIC Instruments Ltd
Jason Lewis (JL) – Stantech
Craig Styles (CS) – MHA

Not Present:

Andrew Cruttenden (AC) – Martello Building Consultancy
Joel Mitchell (JM) – Stagecoach
Gavin Coleman (GC) – Handelsbanken
Andrew Pledger (AP) – Barclays Bank
Paul Roberts (PR) – Metroline
Ewan Green – (EG) - FHDC

2. Minutes of previous meeting

Agreed.

3. Outstanding actions

None.

4. Chairman's comments and report

- RJ welcomed Susan Berdo from Kent County Council as a guest to the meeting. SB outlined her role within the growth and communications team and advised how members of staff from both Visit Kent and Locate in Kent have been taken on directly by KCC.
- A brief discussion of the preceding 'Driving Folkestone Forward' breakfast that heard from guest speakers from Get-Link (Eurotunnel) and FHDC about future development and improvements to the town via the Levelling-Up fund monies.
- RJ mentioned the GSE (Princes Parade) Hythe development that was in consultation this afternoon (26.11.25) at the Hythe Imperial. RJ to share further details of the development.
- RJ also advised that Andrew Metcalf to step in as Chair of the KICC Board. He is also the PR consultant for the above development. TP mentioned the need for transparency in this regard to avoid any conflict of interest.
- A recent Press Release for increased minimum wage has highlighted a mass problem in hospitality with 100,000 jobs lost since last budget. Many businesses across the region are balancing NI increases with reduced hours.

Sector updates from around the table:

Ella (Construction)

- ES advised how the construction industries remain hugely challenging with many barriers still hampering progress and onward development with contracts taking a long time to come to fruition. Planning is still a huge struggle.
- But this year Jenner refuse to be gloomy as we celebrate 150 years in business and have commemorated this will a 150 mile walk around Kent raising just under £7k for local charity Donations with a Difference. This was to promote both physical and mental wellbeing.
- ES also raised a recent tender issued from FHDC for the 'Folca' redevelopment of the former Debenhams site. Jenner did not bid due to the 'open tender' nature of the procurement. A discussion ensued around the need to ensure local businesses have a fairer opportunity to win local contracts.
- Social value was discussed around the table owing to its prominence for businesses now and especially in construction, and ES outlined all the actions Jenner are taking to support the local community through pro-bono provision of labour and trades to support community projects such as Little Land in Ashford and the new Lynx enclosures at Wildwood in Herne Bay.

Tudor – (Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce)

- TP outlined ongoing Lower Thames Crossing (LTC) discussions to ensure local businesses are supported and ultimately 'fit to bid' - to allow more businesses to the table to have the opportunity to be part of the project. A Supplier event will be held at Detling in the New Year.
- Also mentioned recent Gatwick conference and ongoing supply chain business network
- TP discussed AI and its growing presence in business. Directly seeing a reluctance to recruit by making individuals more productive. The KICC AI Academy – an online platform linked with British Chambers - will be launching in January 2026. This works at local level and run on an annual subscription basis.

- The KICC Chamber Awards earlier this month were a great success again and received a record number of applications.
- The Kent Construction Expo was also a huge success back in October.
- They will be rolling out 'Invicta Connect' for businesses 10+ employees in the New Year for greater support of local businesses.

Daniel (Hospitality)

- No major update this time other than to note that hospitality will now understandably be entering its busiest period with the festive season upon us and December looking positive and similar to last year. Biggest challenge is keeping costs down and the sector is exploring the use of technology to enhance productivity.
- Worrying, but as standard, Jan/Feb next year is when things will then fall off the cliff – especially near the seaside.
- DS noted there is a Public House closing every single day in London. But still new businesses coming forwards and Folkestone is better placed than other areas.

Philip (Property) –

- PC commented that it remains a stalled market. Hopefully with movement to come in the NY and more transactions to follow. But incongruously there are no retail units left on their books.
- Economic conditions now should mean more properties are coming back but they're not which is possibly a sign of post-COVID resilience.
- Rents in this region are affordable. Smaller units doing better. Most less than £15,000.

Susan (Kent County Council)

- SB gave overview and insight into the Kent & Medway Business Fund. In 2025 loan approvals stand at £3.567m with 10 approvals in November, 8 new applicants scheduled for December, another 8 in January 2026 but after this it starts to slow down.
- SB commented that all applicants gain 18 hours of business support from Tracey McRobert
- Their latest marketing campaign was very successful in boosting new applications.

Date of next meeting: 28th January 2026, 10am at NIC Instruments (Folkestone).

Future meeting dates:

28/01/26

25/03/26

27/05/26

29/07/26

30/09/26

25/11/26