

**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 19<sup>th</sup> February 2026 at 8.30am.

<b>PRESENT</b>	<b>NAME</b>	<b>POSITION</b>
	Nettie Buss (AB)	Chair
	Maria Callow (MC)	
	Lucy Clark (LAC)	
	Steve Garnett SG)	
	Peter Heritage (PH)	
	James McComas (JM)	
	Andrew Osborne (AO)	
	Tudor Price (TP)	
	Jason Rainbird (JR)	
	Tom Shaw-Dunn (TS-D)	
	Tim Sheppard (TS)	
	Richard Stafford (RS)	
	Natalie Ward (NW)	
<b>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE RECEIVED FROM</b>	Katie Hodson (KH) Dan Sherlock (DS)	

**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 15<sup>th</sup> January 2026 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**

No matters arising.

**4. BUSINESS OF THE MEETING**

**BUSINESS RATES**

**RS** met with Sojan Joseph MP to discuss business rates and minimum wage concerns. Sojan will take **RS**'s concerns to central government and report back. **TP** also shared concerns about large infrastructure projects having high business rates. **AO** added for example Eurotunnel's rates are up by 200% this year.

**RS** mentioned for some businesses in Ashford town centre business rates are higher than

rents. **PH** mentioned brands at the outlet who are struggling being profitable, struggle to cope with rising business rates too.

## **UTILITIES**

**TP** shared that Phil Galpin has reached out to EDF, BT Openreach and South East Water to attend a future AEDG meeting. **TP** shared a South East Water business newsletter link for businesses to sign up to <https://mailchi.mp/a27a48d2b019/non-household-sign-up-form>

## **LINKEDIN AEDG**

**JR** has set up a public page; this will be shared shortly.

## **EUROSTAR**

**AO** shared that a 'Kent Stations Working Group' has been set up. They are trying to engage with Virgin and Trenitalia. Network Rail are in discussion with Eurostar about a track access agreement. Virgin are looking to get an agreement with Eurostar about Temple Mills.

**AO** outlined key topics to resolve are the upfront costs it will take to get Ashford back up and running; the operational cost for running the station; and the incentive scheme London St. Pancras could offer to an international rail provider.

**AO** shared that Jon Worth a rail journalist had endorsed Ashford as the preferred departure station in Kent

## **BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT EVENT ASHFORD COLLEGE**

**LAC** reported that all businesses that attended the stakeholder event pledged to support the college. **LAC** intends to make it a regular event and is considering making it a networking event potentially in the summer. **TP** will look into to see if the college could host a future Chamber Connection or Invicta Connect event.

## **KENT HOSPITALITY FORUM**

**JM** updated on the key topics of concern remain around the minimum wage, food inflation and business rates. The minimum wage increase has made it prohibitive for some businesses to recruit 18-24 year olds.

KCC recently presented the new iteration of Visit Kent. There will be Tiered Partnership Packages to include marketing campaigns, travel trade promotions, networking events and insights.

The forum is also engaging in the Armed Forces Covenant. The LSIP is also now monitoring the hospitality and visitor economy. The forum will meet again in three weeks. **JM** reported positive feedback on recent T Level placements, Eastwell Manor have seven placements working for them and he is really impressed with them.

## **SKILLS 26 EVENT**

**TP** shared that 280 that have signed up for the event and they aim to secure 350 delegates.

The Deputy Director for Skills England will be delivering the open address.

**BROCK**

**AB** mentioned that there had been a recent BBC news item about Brock costing more than £3m to deliver in 2025 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cev7evmz7dmo>. **TP** agreed we still need to find a long term alternative solution.

**5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

**TP** mentioned the Kent AI Conference is on 24 June and it will be headlined by Microsoft. **TP** shared the Kent Apprenticeship Awards is on the 6 June - EKC and Mid Kent College are seeking apprenticeship nominations. Plans are also afoot for the University of Kent, Kent and Medway Business Summit in September. In addition, **TP** is seeking feedback on the Employment Rights Act.

**NW** said she will see if she can source an agricultural representative to join the AEDG at the Women In Agriculture South East event.

**PH** said they are planning to change the existing Zebra crossing at the entrance of the outlet to a Toucan crossing to ease traffic congestion. McArthur Glen is prepared to fund 50% of the total cost of £250,000 and looking to KCC to fund the remainder.

**6. CLOSE**

**AB** thanked AEDG members for their continued support.

Date of next meeting - 8.30am, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2026.

There was no further business and therefore the chair declared that the meeting was closed at 10.00am.

.....Chair – Nettie Buss - Date