

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 16th April 2026 at 8.30am.

PRESENT	NAME	POSITION
	Nettie Buss (AB)	Chair
	Maria Callow (MC)	
	Phil Galpin (PG)	
	Steve Garnett SG)	
	Katie Hodson (KH)	
	Tom Shaw-Dunn (TS-D)	
	Tim Sheppard (TS)	
	Richard Stafford (RS)	
	Natalie Ward (NW)	
APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE RECEIVED FROM	Jo Brown (JB) Peter Heritage (PH) James McComas (JM) Andrew Osborne (AO) Tudor Price (TP) Jason Rainbird (JR) 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 19th March 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

Update on LinkedIn AEDG. **AB** will follow up with **JR**.

Source an agricultural representative to join the AEDG. **AB** commented this is becoming more of a need to gauge the needs and concerns of this sector, ideally a long standing chamber member. **MC** suggested that the group should source a chamber sector list, **PG** follow up.

4. BUSINESS OF THE MEETING

PHIL GALPIN UPDATE

PG shared that he heads up a couple of departments since moving on from running the Growth Hub for 10 years. **PG** runs the chamber's business support contracts which covers an array of areas, including Government funded contracts and he's responsible for low carbon audits for

construction organisations.

PG is also responsible for the ScaleUp Ashford programme, which offers highly intensive support for some SMEs who are require prospects within Ashford Borough. The SMEs must have an appetite for growth. **PG** is seeking applications from food tech and the creative tech sectors.

PG is also policy lead at the chamber too which involves coordinating round table discussions, the latest one was on the Employment Rights Bill, there were 37 attendees. At these sessions information is shared and it also serves as an information gathering exercise.

KH commented there are concerns around business growth relating to the Employment Rights Bill. Potential future round table discussions could be around policy relating to the hospitality sector and business rates.

BUSINESS RATES

AB expressed concerns around where to signpost SMEs about business rates. **RS** responded by explaining Ashford Borough Council collect the business rates. The Valuation Office Agency (VOA) set the rates, but they do not have a direct contact to talk to.

RS further explained when the figures first came out in the budget last year, there was a great misunderstanding about what that actually meant. Businesses are not allowed to stop paying rates, he recommended trying to speak the customer service team at Ashford Borough Council.

There are very few businesses that are eligible to get small business rate relief. **RS** expressed he is quite happy to explain how business rates work; he reiterated the rateable value is the key.

NW added it's stressful for some businesses. **NW** has a client who doesn't know whether his business rate bill is going to end up being £10,000 or £100,000, the client is trying to go through the appeals process.

BORDER FORCE

AB and **TS** suggested the group could visit the Border Force facility to understand more about the service.

MAKING TAX DIGITAL

AB had previously mentioned her concern about Making Tax Digital (MTD). **KH** added the first return is due on 7th August 2026.

KATIE LAM MP

AB will reach out to Katie Lam MP to see if she would like to recommend an agricultural business or if she would be happy to join a meeting in the future.

ASHFORD TOWN CENTRE

AB and **RS** expressed the need for a town centre update at the next meeting from **AO**. Currently there is demolition and closure of car parks and SGN are digging up New Street. Also further feedback on Elwick Place new ownership.

MC mentioned there is a new bar and hospitality venue in Coachworks which is positive for

the town centre.

ASHFORD COLLEGE

JB sent in a response to thank those who fed back comments about the business engagement leaflet. **JB** also said the North School in Ashford would like to join a meeting to talk about pathways to help employing youngster in Ashford. **AB** suggested this could be at the June meeting.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

RS shared the commercial property market is busier than last year and there is a lot happening.

6. CLOSE

AB thanked AEDG members for their continued support.

Date of next meeting - 8.30am, 21st May 2026 at the Ashford Designer Outlet.

There was no further business and therefore the chair declared that the meeting was closed at 9.15am.

.....Chair – Nettie Buss - Date