

Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce
Ashford Economic Development Group

Minutes of an ordinary meeting of the AEDG held at Shadoxhurst Village Hall on 25th September 2026 at 9.00am.

PRESENT	NAME	POSITION
	Nettie Buss (AB)	Chair
	Aisha Button (ABB)	
	Maria Callow (MC)	
	Lucy Clark (LC)	
	Katie Hodson (KH)	
	Doug Jackson (DJ)	
	Katie Lam MP (KL)	Guest
	Andrew Lymm (AL)	Guest
	Jessica Bright (JB)	Guest
	James McComas (JM)	
	Andrew Osborne (AO)	
	Tudor Price (TP)	
	Jason Rainbird (JR)	
	Dan Sherlock (DS)	
	Tim Sheppard (TS)	
	Richard Stafford (RS)	
	Natalie Ward (NW)	
APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE RECEIVED FROM	Phil Galpin (PG) Peter Heritage (PH) 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 9.00am.

2. APPROVAL OF PRIOR MINUTES

Minutes of the board meeting held on 20th August 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

LC said she would resend details of the Ashford College ADHD event in October.

4. BUSINESS OF THE MEETING

AB welcomed Katie Lam MP (**KL**) joined by Andrew Lymm (**AL**) and Jess X (**JX**). Individual

introductions were made from the AEDG and **AB** gave an overview of AEDG's purpose.

TP added that the AEDG raise policy issues with the BCC and the BCC use the AEDG as a sounding board. **TP** has met with local utility companies too. A further key topic is the Employment Rights Act which has been challenging for local businesses as it is rolled out.

TP has concerns about the government's Industrial Strategy; in particular how many businesses in Kent are outside the strategy's clusters area of interest. **TP** is keen to make sure Kent is not left behind.

ENERGY PERFORMANCE CERTIFICATE (EPC)

RS shared his concerns about how EPC's for commercial properties criteria has changed. the EPC grades a building's energy efficiency. The majority of Kent stock is under 1,000sqm. Many businesses have been selling stock because they could not afford to comply with the EPC's minimum rating.

The government has announced updated trajectories to the commercial EPC which has meant they did not need to sell the property. **RS** was seeking clarification on EPCs in the future and the need to rethink EPC's in the long term.

NATIONAL INSURANCE

JR has concerns about minimum wage salaries in relation to his team. He would like to see 18yr olds to opt to take a lower wage. His middle layer employees have more experience but do not earn much more.

KL acknowledged the situation was challenging and difficult to manage. **KL** would like to see some flexibility within the rules, especially around minimum wage. She was concerned it is a tool to lead the market.

DJ is concerned about the squeezed middle employees, as businesses cannot afford to increase wages by 12% to 14%. He also felt it was hard to find young people who are work ready.

KL acknowledged she thought there is a higher proportion of young people starting work without experience. **TP** added the Low Pay Commission visited the AEDG and their ideology focused around by increasing the minimum wage it would increase productivity.

KL expressed that those that set the policy often don't appreciate what it is like to work within these rules. **DJ** summarised ideology does not meet reality.

JM asked if there was a realization of the consequences of deskilling; is there an appreciation of the impact of losing supervisors or middle management in the hospitality industry. **KL** agreed the new minimum wage had a distortive effect.

DS questioned the impact of not being able to take on more trainees in the professional services if AI can outperform their duties. **AB** and **KH** agreed there were less skilled people coming through in the accountancy sector. **KL** queried how the gap is going to be filled in the future.

BUSINESS RATES

JR has a business where all employees are in the office every day. He's struggling to compete with hybrid competitors who pay less business rates but have a larger number of employees. **JR** does have some business rate relief. **JR** maintains there should be a review of business rates.

KL asked the AEDG how businesses would prefer to resolve the issue. **DS** and **JR** suggested to increase VAT. **AO** mentioned there are some instances where some town centre shops were paying more in business rates than in rent. **AO** shared that less businesses are getting business rate relief in Ashford. The business rates system is not working.

TP said there needs to be an incentive to grow medium sized businesses. **LC** expressed her frustration about the bureaucracy around young people not getting work experience.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

AO offered to give **KL** a briefing on supporting bringing back International Rail to Ashford.

KL expressed her appreciation of local businesses sharing their opinion. **KL**, **AL** and **JX** left the meeting at 10.15am.

TP expressed his ambition to have a Councillor hustings to encourage an open debate about local business issues. **AO** said he would ask Member Services at ABC how that might work.

AB has also spoken to Patrick Campbell from the Bank of England who would like to attend a future AEDG meeting.

Finally **TP** shared there would be Chamber round up after the Budget in October.

6. CLOSE

AB thanked AEDG members for their continued support.

Date of next meeting 22nd October at 8.30am.

There was no further business and therefore the chair declared that the meeting was closed at 10.30am.

.....Chair – Nettie Buss - Date