

**From:** David Wimble, Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Special Projects

**Simon Jones, Corporate Director of Growth, Environment and Transport**

**To:** Growth, Economic Development & Communities Cabinet Committee

**Subject:** Implementation of the Kent & Medway Economic Framework - Ambition 5

**Classification:** Unrestricted

**Past Pathway of report:** N/A

**Future Pathway of report:** N/A

**Electoral Division:** All KCC electoral divisions

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**Summary:** This report provides an overview of the progress in implementing the Kent and Medway Economic Framework Ambition 5 ‘Create Diverse, Distinctive and Vibrant Places’. It sets out the high-level key actions that have taken place recently and the future activity planned to support sustainable growth of Kent & Medway’s economy, through to 2030. This is the final paper in the current regular series of updates on the Framework’s five ambitions. An overview of the achievements and impact of the breadth of the Framework in its first two years will be launched in the summer.

**Recommendation:** The Cabinet Committee is asked to note the report and provide recommendations to the Cabinet Member as to how they would wish to receive future updates or insight on impact and performance monitoring of the Framework.

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## 1. Background

- 1.1 In April 2024, the [Kent & Medway Economic Partnership](#)<sup>1</sup> (KMEP) approved the publication of the [Kent & Medway Economic Framework](#) (KMEF). This a medium-term strategy that looks to guide actions that support the growth and prosperity of the region (functional economic area) through to 2030. The strategy is not a funded strategy, so no specific resource was allocated by KCC or its partners to support delivery. A range of programmes, partners and activity have therefore contributed to delivery against the implementation plan.

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<sup>1</sup> KMEP is the local growth board for this area, and its membership includes Kent County Council, Medway Council, all district councils’ leaders, businesses, universities and colleges. Its website is [www.kmep.org.uk](http://www.kmep.org.uk)

- 1.2 The Framework focuses on three overarching objectives (Productivity, Sustainability and Inclusivity) which sit above five ambitions for delivery, these being:
1. Enable innovative, productive and creative businesses
  2. Widen opportunities and unlock talent
  3. Secure resilient infrastructure for planned sustainable growth
  4. Place economic opportunity at the centre of community wellbeing and prosperity
  5. Create diverse, distinctive and vibrant places.

## 2. **KMEF Implementation**

2.1 Since publication, the KCC Economy Team (which acts as the KMEP Secretariat) has been working to implement the KMEF ambitions in partnership with the KMEP Board Members, the Business Advisory Board (BAB), and a range of local partners and stakeholders.

2.2 For each of the five ambitions, a private sector board member and a local authority officer acts as a Thematic Lead for the ambition, helping to oversee the implementation of the KMEF and direct the team's activities.

2.3 The information below outlines the focus of the work to date against the ambition 5 of the KMEF: 'Create diverse, distinctive and vibrant places'. The action areas under this ambition are:

17. Growing Kent and Medway's dynamic creative and cultural economy
18. Supporting our network of innovative and creative places
19. Developing Kent's Rural Economy
20. Valuing the natural and historic environment
21. Developing the visitor economy

2.4 This paper provides short updates on:

- Work to support businesses in creative and cultural economy sector
- Work to promote the county's creative and cultural economy offer
- Work to support Kent and Medway's rural economy and the agri-food sector specifically.
- Activities that support Kent's natural environment
- Work to boost the county's visitor economy

## 3. **Action Area 17 - Growing Kent and Medway's dynamic creative and cultural economy:**

3.1 This action area recognises the value of the creative and cultural economy to Kent & Medway and its contribution to placemaking. Flagship venues such as Jasmin Vardimon Home, the Marlowe Theatre, Turner Contemporary and the Maidstone Studios are all making a significant contribution to the creative and cultural sector through providing opportunities for training and employment, visitors to the county and regeneration.

- 3.2 The [Create Growth Programme](#) (Create South East) has now concluded, having delivered a significant programme of support for high-growth potential creative businesses across Kent and Medway. This programme was part of a wider South East Partnership, funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, including Essex, Kent & Medway, East Sussex, West Sussex, and Brighton & Hove. Through mentoring, peer-to-peer cohorts, specialist workshops and access to investor networks, the programme supported businesses to become investment-ready and scale – with each cohort being oversubscribed due to significant local demand. 41 Kent and Medway firms have been supported within the programme against a total cohort of 123 businesses. KCC acted as Accountable Body for the programme, with delivery undertaken through a regional partnership. The programme closed at the end of the 2025-26 financial year and work has been undertaken to evaluate its success and opportunities for legacy activity, informing future approaches to supporting high-growth sectors and creative cluster development. The South East Creative Economy Network (SECEN) which covers Essex, Kent & Medway and East Sussex is looking to embed this learning into future pan-regional activity to support creative businesses, including championing the concept of Creative Opportunity Zones.
- 3.3 During its first year of operation, the [Kent Skills Bootcamps programme](#) delivered three courses for creative industry professionals covering Creative Production and Digital Business Skills. Demand was high with 60 participants completing the courses compared with the 40 places originally planned. As at the end of March, 30 learners had achieved positive outcomes: either confirmed freelance contracts for future work linked directly to the Skills Bootcamps or independent learners moving into self-employment within the sector. The majority of the learners who were already employed have secured an enhanced role as a result of the bootcamp. Courses planned for 26-27 are 'Digital Business Skills for Self Employed Creative Freelancers' (20 learner spaces) and 'Creative & Digital Assistant Production Management' (30 learner spaces).
- 3.4 Since relaunching in November 2023, the [Kent & Medway Business Fund](#) has provided loans to a number of innovative businesses in the creative and cultural economy sector to support expansions, job creation and business development. Recent loan recipients include including Ramsgate Art Club CIC who converted an old wine storehouse building to a new arts & hospitality venue using KMBF funds and a new entertainment venue offering digital and creative experiences due to open soon in Canterbury.
- 3.5 Two recent events took place at the Maidstone studios focusing on Kent & Medway's wider creative sector. A [Kent Ambassadors](#) briefing event took place at the Maidstone Studios focused on the local media, wider changes in the sector and how technology including AI is changing the way in which news media is being produced, targeted and consumed. The event highlighted good practice from local companies and provided insight into future opportunities for the county's creative and media businesses. The [Kent Film Office](#) also plays a key role in supporting the film industry and providing opportunities for many local businesses and freelancers in the sector. The KFO recently held a 20 year celebration at the Maidstone studios where it reported generating

over £85 million in inward investment, securing more than 300 trainee placements in the industry for young people living or studying in Kent and supporting the recording of elements of 186 films, 169 TV dramas and 231 music videos in the county.

- 3.6 The recently published [Local Growth Plan evidence base](#) and emerging Local Growth Plan which aims to identify further opportunities for high growth sector development in the county, identifies potential future activities that could continue to support the digital & technologies sector (one of our four high growth sectors) including: the potential to support cross-sector innovation between digital firms and other priority sectors; create spaces to facilitate cooperation develop digital skills among business leaders; and promote and provide high tech workspace to support sector growth.

#### **4. Action Area 18 - Supporting our network of innovative and creative places:**

- 4.1 The action area focuses on high streets and town centres in particular as places where creative and cultural activities can drive footfall and support businesses and regenerate spaces.
- 4.2 While high street regeneration is an activity primarily led by District and Borough councils, KCC's Economy function has supported projects that have helped revitalise several Kent town centres. The [No Use Empty](#) programme and **Kent & Medway Business Fund** both stepped in to provide loans to facilitate the transformation of the once derelict [Old Wine Warehouse in Ramsgate](#) into three distinct spaces offering a comfortable office environment with hot desks (Ramsgate Works), a café area with outside courtyard seating and gardens and an atmospheric cellar bar, and performance space (Ramsgate Arts Club).
- 4.3 Canterbury City Council has made use of an allocation of £20m 'Levelling Up Fund' (LUF) to make significant enhancements to Canterbury's world-class heritage offer. The many projects included restoring the roof and masonry of the Poor Priests' Hospital safeguarding centuries of history and allowing the Marlowe Kit youth theatre company to develop its offer as well as the creation of public events space in Westgate Square. Similarly Dover District Council has used LUF funding to support creative sector education provision in the new Bench Building with East Kent Colleges group planning to deliver the courses at the new creative hub.

#### **5. Action Area 19 – Developing Kent's Rural Economy:**

- 5.1 Farmers, growers and producers in Kent and Medway contribute significantly to the UK's food security, providing 40% of the horticultural goods (vegetables, leafy greens, salad products) consumed domestically, and 80% of the top fruit (apples and pears). Viticulture is a fast-growing sector locally with over 50 vineyards now in the county. This action area recognises that the county's *'highly productive rural economy has some distinctive assets: in relation to its food sector'* as well as challenges in relation to rural isolation. It therefore aims to *'support the sustainable development of the rural economy, ensuring that there is investment in connectivity, workspace and local services linked with the changing nature of work, the growth and resilience of Kent's important*

*food and farming sector and its natural assets.* This section of the report summarises a number of programmes and activities in place that deliver against this action area.

- 5.2 [Produced in Kent](#) (PinK) is the county's trade organisation dedicated to supporting, promoting and marketing all types of food, drink and craft businesses in Kent. PinK currently has over 200 business members as well as industry partners and works to champion local produce, supporting businesses in a sector which has experienced many challenges in recent years. PinK's core activities include advice and support to member businesses including through training events on topics such as routes to market and 'meet the buyer' activities, targeted marketing and communication activities to support local businesses through encouraging residents, other businesses and visitors to Kent to buy local. This year will see the return of the Taste of Kent Awards, for its 20th year, which provides an opportunity to celebrate the county's local food producers, independent retailers, and hospitality businesses.
- 5.3 Recognising the increasing importance of Kent's growing and vibrant **viticulture sector**, the [Visit Kent](#) team has recently commissioned a piece of work to promote Kent's vineyards. The project will develop a targeted communications and marketing strategy, take forward further work to explore a Protected Designation of Origin status for Kent wines, bring together key stakeholders and businesses to enhance cooperation within the sector. Viticulture presents significant opportunities for Kent's rural economy thanks to the increasing popularity of English wines and the potential to bring additional visitors to the county to visit at least one of the many vineyards during their stay. Some 40% of Gatwick's long-haul passengers indicated a wish to visit a vineyard as part of their stay in the UK and Kent's offer is at the forefront. A group of viticulture businesses from West Flanders visited Kent in November 2025 to explore opportunities for collaboration and joint working demonstrating an initial international reach for Kent's viticulture sector.
- 5.4 [Growing Kent & Medway](#) is a five year programme led by NIAB EMR<sup>2</sup> that has been supporting innovation in the local food and drink industry. Now reaching its end, the programme has engaged over 700 businesses and seen 71 new products brought to the market as well as facilitating 262 collaborations between researchers (universities) and businesses in the county. Work to seek additional funding was recently carried out with the submission of '**From Ground to Growth**' a Kent and Medway's Local Innovation Partnership Fund (LIPF) bid to establish a nationally significant, industry-led innovation cluster. The focus was on the food and agri-food system, spanning primary production through to processing, logistics and consumption. The proposal sought to address long-term challenges around productivity, resilience and national food security by accelerating near-to-market innovation, technology adoption and commercialisation. It was developed as a triple-helix partnership between businesses, universities and civic partners, bringing together a portfolio of delivery-ready projects across agri-tech, food innovation, digital, energy and circular bioeconomy themes. The bid positioned Kent and Medway's unique

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<sup>2</sup> A research institute in East Malling, a world class centre of excellence for innovation in commercial horticulture

concentration of assets as a platform for driving sustained economic growth and private sector investment. Although KCC was informed in April that the bid was not successful (all funding was allocated to other parts of the UK, principally Mayoral or DPP authorities), the work done to bring industry and research together demonstrated a strong appetite for joint working in the county and next steps will be considered once detailed feedback is received.

- 5.5 **The Kent Fresh Food Group** (KCC and industry reps) has met regularly to explore challenges for the industry in Kent over the last few years. One particular issue is a difficulty in forming and accessing local supply chain opportunities. A small project is due to be commissioned by KCC based on the work of the fresh food group to examine the feasibility of and explore the potential of local supply chain activity to support local food & drink businesses. The short pilot project will research how to develop and strengthen local food and drink supply chains by connecting and working with local producers; specifically large commercial grower businesses, via the Kent Fresh Food Production / Horticulture Task Group, as well as smaller producers, via Produced In Kent with the aim of connecting them with large, willing institutional buyers (local government public procurers, schools & hospitals). The aim is to recognise existing supply chains, current barriers and to identify practical procurement and logistics solutions that enable increased local sourcing and can be scaled in future. An important outcome will be to understand the challenges of existing networks, identify how and what needs to change to enable local procurement, or not, and to map and identify suggested solutions.
- 5.6 Since relaunching in November 2023, [the Kent & Medway Business Fund](#) has provided loans to innovative businesses in the agri-food or rural sector to support expansions, job creation and business development including Defined Wines which offers contract winemaking services, and Kentish Condiments, which manufactures a range of food products, and Commar Services which grows, conserves and sells rare and heritage fruit trees to both commercial and retail customers across the UK.
- 5.7 **Building Digital UK** are leading a £112million contract (as part of their national Project Gigabit programme) to improve broadband connectivity across Kent and Medway. This work is focused on those rural areas that will not benefit from telecom providers' upgrade programmes and is being delivered by City Fibre. KCC is continuing to monitor the project's rollout and press Building Digital UK to extend their current build plans to ensure that the Government's ambition for at least 99% of premises to have gigabit capable connections by 2032 is achieved in Kent.
- 5.8 Finally, the [Local Growth Plan evidence base](#) completed in February 2026 and emerging Local Growth Plan which aims to identify further opportunities for high growth sector development in the county, identifies potential future activities that could continue to support the agri-food sector including: tailored business support and access to finance; encouraging further technology adoption in the sector; upskilling local residents to support industry needs; enhancing supporting infrastructure; and supporting sector resilience.

## 6. Action Area 20 – Valuing the natural and historic environment

- 6.1 The [Kent Downs National Landscape](#) team, working with partners in northern France, is progressing a potential cross-Channel UNESCO Global Geopark bid. Visit Kent is supporting this work by helping to position the Geopark as a driver of sustainable tourism, rural regeneration and international profile-raising for Kent. UNESCO Global Geopark status would significantly enhance Kent's visibility as a destination for responsible travel, recognising the international importance of the county's geodiversity while reinforcing long-term landscape protection and biodiversity management. If successful, the programme will support the development of new, low-impact tourism experiences that benefit local communities and strengthen the resilience of the visitor economy.
- 6.2 Visit Kent has actively supported the Geopark ambition through international engagement and promotion, including recent attendance in France at a cross-Channel sustainable tourism event. This activity has helped strengthen relationships with French regional partners, promote shared priorities around responsible tourism and visitor management, and position Kent as a committed partner in sustainable destination development. This work aligns with the Economy Team's wider role in destination management, ensuring that future growth in the visitor economy is environmentally sustainable, supports local businesses and reinforces the long-term value of Kent's natural and historic assets.
- 6.3 The Economy Team is also supporting delivery of the [Kent and Medway Local Nature Recovery Strategy](#) by ensuring economic growth, tourism development and place-marketing activity align with nature recovery objectives. Working closely with environment colleagues and external partners, the team is helping to embed nature-positive principles into destination management, business support and visitor experience development. This includes promoting nature-based tourism, encouraging responsible visitor behaviour, and supporting businesses to engage with sustainability and biodiversity priorities. By aligning economic development activity with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, the team is helping to ensure that Kent's natural environment is protected and enhanced while continuing to support inclusive, sustainable economic growth.

## **7. Action Area 21 – Developing the Visitor Economy**

- 7.1 Since November 2025, Kent County Council, in partnership with Medway Council has brought the Visit Kent service in-house following the liquidation of Go to Places, acting at pace to protect continuity of service for the county's tourism and hospitality sector. A new Visit Kent team has been established within Kent County Council, securing specialist expertise, stabilising operations, reacquiring core assets and re-engaging partners and businesses. Early activity has focused on maintaining confidence in the sector, restoring key communication channels and laying the foundations for a modern, publicly accountable destination management service for Kent and Medway.
- 7.2 The Visit Kent team is now delivering a refreshed and expanding programme of visitor economy activity. This includes: reinstating the Cambridge Economic Impact Model to provide robust, up-to-date intelligence for the sector; refreshing the Kent and Medway Destination Management Plan; developing a

new Visit Kent website; and delivering a county-wide, free-to-access business support offer for tourism and hospitality businesses. Alongside this, new tiered partnership models are being developed to support income generation and deeper industry engagement, while targeted marketing, campaign activity, travel trade engagement and international promotion are being progressed to support sustainable growth in priority markets.

- 7.3 The latest data for 2024 highlights the continued importance of the visitor economy to Kent. The sector supported approximately 82,000 jobs, representing around 11% of total employment, and generated £4.1 billion in economic value. This marks the first time visitor spending has returned to pre-Pandemic 2019 levels. In total, Kent welcomed around 66 million domestic and international visits, including 1.3 million overseas visitors who generated £374 million in spend. This overseas performance exceeds pre-Pandemic levels. These figures therefore demonstrate strong recovery and growth compared to previous years and reinforce the visitor economy's role as a foundational sector, supporting a wide range of small and medium-sized businesses across the county.
- 7.4 The team is also progressing reaccreditation of Visit Kent as a Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) with Visit England. Achieving LVEP status is a priority as it will formally recognise Kent's strategic leadership of the visitor economy, strengthen relationships with national agencies and unlock access to additional support, funding opportunities and collaborative programmes. Reaccreditation will further embed destination management best practice and ensure Kent continues to influence national policy and investment decisions affecting the sector.
- 7.5 The Kent and Medway Economic Framework identifies the county's brand as a critical enabler of growth, and the team is responding through the development of the Grow in Kent programme. Grow in Kent brings together the county's visitor economy, inward investment and growth narrative under a single, coherent place brand, building on Kent's strong identity as the Garden of England while projecting a modern, confident and outward-facing offer. Through Visit Kent, Grow in Kent will showcase Kent's natural, cultural and historic assets, support foundational sectors such as tourism, hospitality and retail, and align promotion of the county as a place to live, visit, invest and grow. This joined-up approach ensures that brand, destination management and economic growth activity reinforce one another and deliver long-term benefits for Kent's communities and businesses.

## **8. Conclusion**

- 8.1 This report has provided a brief overview of some of the progress in implementing Ambition 5 of the Kent and Medway Economic Framework. As can be seen, significant work is underway. Future activity planned to support sustainable growth of Kent & Medway's economy, through to 2030.

## **9. Recommendation:**

- 9.1 The Cabinet Committee is asked to note the report and provide recommendations to the Cabinet Member as to how they would wish to

receive future updates or insight on impact and performance monitoring of the Framework.

**10. Contact details:**

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