

**LICHFIELDS**

# **Maidstone Economic Development Strategy**

Maidstone Borough Council

**September 2021**



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# Structure

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Annex 1: State of the Nation Report

# 1. Introduction

## **This Economic Development Strategy sets out a vision and plan of activity to enable Maidstone to achieve its economic growth potential over the period to 2030.**

### Introduction

This Economic Development Strategy has been prepared by Lichfields on behalf of Maidstone Borough Council ('MBC') to set out the Council's vision and ambition for the future growth and development of Maidstone Borough's economy.

Embracing a proactive and strategic approach to enabling local growth represents the golden thread running through the Council's Corporate Plan, Local Plan and relevant service areas, and the Councils' number one corporate priority.

A great deal has changed since the Council adopted its previous Economic Development Strategy in 2014 and going forward the Council needs to reposition its growth strategy to take advantage of changing economic circumstances and to ensure that the Borough is in the best possible position to capture and realise economic growth, prosperity and productivity improvements over the course of the coming months and years to 2030.

In this context, key requirements of the brief are to:

- Review and 'sense check' current economic vision for the Borough;
- Provide set of new interventions for the Council to clearly articulate and execute its strategy to grow the local economy and increase productivity;
- Set a five-year action plan against these interventions to support the vision;
- Consider local economic impacts and opportunities from Brexit, changes to the national and local growth agenda and the Local Plan Review/emerging policies; and
- Align policy development and actions with wider strategic growth opportunities at the Kent and Medway, sub-regional and national level.

### Consultation

The Council has adopted an inclusive approach to developing this Strategy, engaging with a wide range of organisations and encouraging new ideas to come forward and collaboration to take place. This has involved a series of workshops with key stakeholders, elected members and local businesses to gain a better understanding of business needs, economic issues and growth opportunities. These have been convened virtually due to operational restrictions posed by Covid-19.

### Covid-19

This Economic Development Strategy has been prepared during a period of significant economic uncertainty associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, and it is difficult to anticipate the full extent of the economic shock at the time of writing. It therefore considers both the support that Maidstone's economy will need through recovery in the short and medium term, as well as how the area's potential can be enhanced over the longer-term.

The remainder of this document sets out:

- The strategic context that this Economic Development Strategy has been prepared within (section 2.0);
- An overview of the local economy, key growth challenges and opportunities that the Borough faces, and our understanding of local economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic as they continue to evolve (section 3.0);
- Our strategic priorities for guiding local economic growth (section 4.0); and
- Our collective approach to delivering this Strategy through a package of future actions to guide short, medium and longer term programmes of activity over the next five years (section 5.0).

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## 2. Strategic Context

This EDS has been prepared against an important strategic backdrop of policy initiatives, strategies and plans at the national, regional and local level.



## 2. Strategic Context

**The economic development funding landscape has evolved rapidly over recent months in line with the government's economic recovery response to Covid-19.**

### Strategic Funding Opportunities

The national policy and funding landscape for economic development has evolved rapidly over recent months in line with the government's economic recovery response to Covid-19, and this provides an important strategic backdrop for Maidstone's Economic Development Strategy and, crucially, its implementation over the months and years ahead.

A summary of potential funding options and opportunities is presented to the right, based on key policy and funding announcements made in the Budget 2021 and Spending Review 2020 which prioritise funding to support the government's response to Covid-19 and invest in the UK's recovery.

This is not an exhaustive list of funding sources that may be available to support delivery of the strategic growth priorities identified in this Economic Development Strategy; there will be additional scheme and sector specific sources of potential funding that the Council and its partners may also need to explore, and the nature of funds available will change over time in line with national and local priorities or as future rounds are launched.

Access to funding is typically on the basis of competitive bidding processes either directly to government or through the LEP depending on the nature of the fund. These processes usually have defined criteria (e.g. scale of funding, defined outputs) and conditions (e.g. timescale for delivery, private sector leverage) and may be subject to business cases developed in line with national guidance.

### Budget 2021 and Spending Review 2020: Key Funding Priorities

- £4 billion **Levelling Up Fund** to upgrade local infrastructure and support economic recovery. It will be open to all local areas in England and will prioritise bids to drive growth and regeneration in places in need, those facing particular challenges, and areas that have received less government investment in recent years.
- Total investment of £12 billion to support a **Green Industrial Revolution** and recovery from Covid-19. This includes £1.9 billion for charging infrastructure, £1.1 billion to make homes and buildings net zero-ready, £1 billion for a Carbon Capture and Storage Infrastructure Fund, and additional investment in renewable energy generation.
- SR20 provided an initial indication for what the **UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)** will invest in and how it will be targeted. The UKSPF will operate UK-wide, with total domestic UK-wide funding at least matching current EU receipts, on average reaching around £1.5 billion a year. A portion of the UKSPF will target places most in need across the UK, such as ex-industrial areas, deprived towns and rural and coastal communities.
- In the Budget 2021, the government announced the introduction of the **UK Community Renewal Fund**; an additional £220 million of investment being provided for 2021-22 to help support local areas to pilot imaginative new approaches and programmes and prepare them to take full advantage of the UKSPF when it launches in 2022. Projects are expected to align with a series of investment priorities including investment in skills, investment for local business, investment in communities and place, and supporting people into employment.
- Government has launched a new **National Infrastructure Strategy** setting out its plans to transform the UK's economic infrastructure. This is based around three central objectives: economic recovery, levelling up and unleashing the potential of the Union, and meeting the UK's net zero emissions target by 2050. These objectives will be supported by the creation of a new infrastructure bank to catalyse private investment in projects across the UK, as well as through a comprehensive set of reforms to the way infrastructure is delivered.
- The government intend to publish further details on how these key funding opportunities will operate during the course of 2021.

## 2. Strategic Context

**Emerging strategic plans at the local and sub-regional scale provide a timely opportunity to align key economic growth policy development and actions.**

### South East Local Industrial Strategy

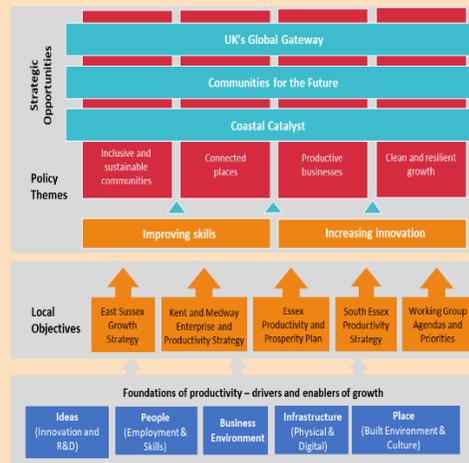
Following publication of the government’s national Industrial Strategy in 2017, the South East LEP (SELEP) has produced a Local Industrial Strategy (LIS) which identifies the following overall vision:

*“Through targeted investment in our people and places and progressing our partnership with London, we will enhance the economic vitality of UK plc by increasing productivity across the SELEP area, delivering £28 billion additional Gross Value Added by 2030.”*

At the heart of the strategy are three distinctive strategic opportunities that the South East will harness to position the region as the UK’s global gateway, delivering investment in communities across the region to drive innovation, productivity and sustainable growth (see Figure below).

This provides Maidstone Borough with particular opportunities to contribute towards the ‘communities for the future’ priority, given the scale of development planned over the coming years, in particular within a number of new garden settlement locations.

The publication and implementation of the South East LIS is currently on hold while the unprecedented economic challenges arising from Covid-19 are being considered by the LEP.



### 2050 Kent and Medway Enterprise and Productivity Strategy

Aligned with the LIS, the emerging Kent and Medway Enterprise and Productivity Strategy identifies a number of major opportunities across Kent and Medway which have the potential to transform productivity and prosperity.

The draft ambition for 2050 is *“to fully realise our economic potential by making more of our strategic geographic location and maintaining, and enhancing our attractive living and business environment, ensuring a more reciprocal relationship with London.”*

It focuses on enabling three key objectives; super connecting the places of Kent and Medway; upskilling the workforce; and supporting well led business to grow and innovate.

Specific ambitions linked to these objectives include being a smart international gateway to Europe, to be recognised as the ‘Clean Garden of England’ and as an international destination for investment and tourism.

The Enterprise and Productivity Strategy provides particular opportunities for Maidstone to align its own local growth objectives around key priorities such as settlements of the future, as well as tapping into wider growth initiatives such as the Kent Science and Innovation Corridor, the Thames Estuary and the Thames Estuary Production Corridor.



## 2. Strategic Context

Emerging strategic plans at the local and sub-regional scale provide a timely opportunity to align key economic growth policy development and actions.

### Maidstone Borough Council Strategic Plan 2019-2045

This sets out the Council's aspiration for Maidstone through to 2045, and a plan to achieve this aspiration. It identifies four underpinning priorities to shape Council activity and partnership working in support of a vision for a vibrant, prosperous, urban and rural community at the heart of Kent where everyone can realise their potential:

- 1. Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure:** a Borough where there is a variety of jobs, housing need is met and infrastructure is in place to meet the growing needs of our residents and economy.
- 2. Safe, Clean and Green:** an attractive and clean place for all, a safe place to live, protecting and where possible enhancing our environment.
- 3. Homes and Communities:** a good balance of different types of homes that enable good health and wellbeing for our communities.
- 4. A Thriving Place:** a Borough that is open for business, attractive for visitors and is an enjoyable and prosperous place to live.

Maidstone's Economic Development Strategy has an important role to play in facilitating these Corporate growth priorities for the Borough, all of which are reflected within the updated economic vision and accompanying strategic framework presented in this document.



### Maidstone Local Plan Review

The Council is currently preparing a review of the Maidstone Borough Local Plan to provide an up-to-date framework for development across the Borough over the period to 2037. Consultation recently took place on a Regulation 18 'Preferred Approach' which includes an allowance for an additional 18,210 new homes, over 100,000sq.m of business floorspace and a number of strategic development opportunities within the Borough.

The Local Plan Review recognises the uncertainties that exist post Covid-19 and post Brexit, but also that the areas which fare best in difficult economic times are those which offer the maximum choice and flexibility to those wishing to invest or to reinvest in employment creating activities. It also acknowledges the vital role that Maidstone town centre plays at the heart of the Borough and community, and the need to ensure that it is equipped properly for its ongoing role as the County Town of Kent. A forthcoming Town Centre Action Plan will look at how, over the period up to 2050, it can be transformed through a programme of new investment in high added value jobs, an improved retail, leisure and cultural offer, new community, health and education infrastructure and new and enhanced green spaces.

It also seeks to allocate new garden settlements to concentrate the Borough's future growth needs within sustainable locations. These offer potential to accommodate new homes as well as significant employment and business growth opportunities.



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### 3. Maidstone Economic Profile

As Kent's County Town, Maidstone and surrounding Borough play an important sub-regional role, accommodating a critical mass of businesses, jobs and residents.

#### Spatial Profile

The Borough of Maidstone covers an area of approximately 40,000 hectares and is situated in the heart of Kent. Maidstone is the County Town of Kent and approximately 75% of its 171,800 population live in the urban area.

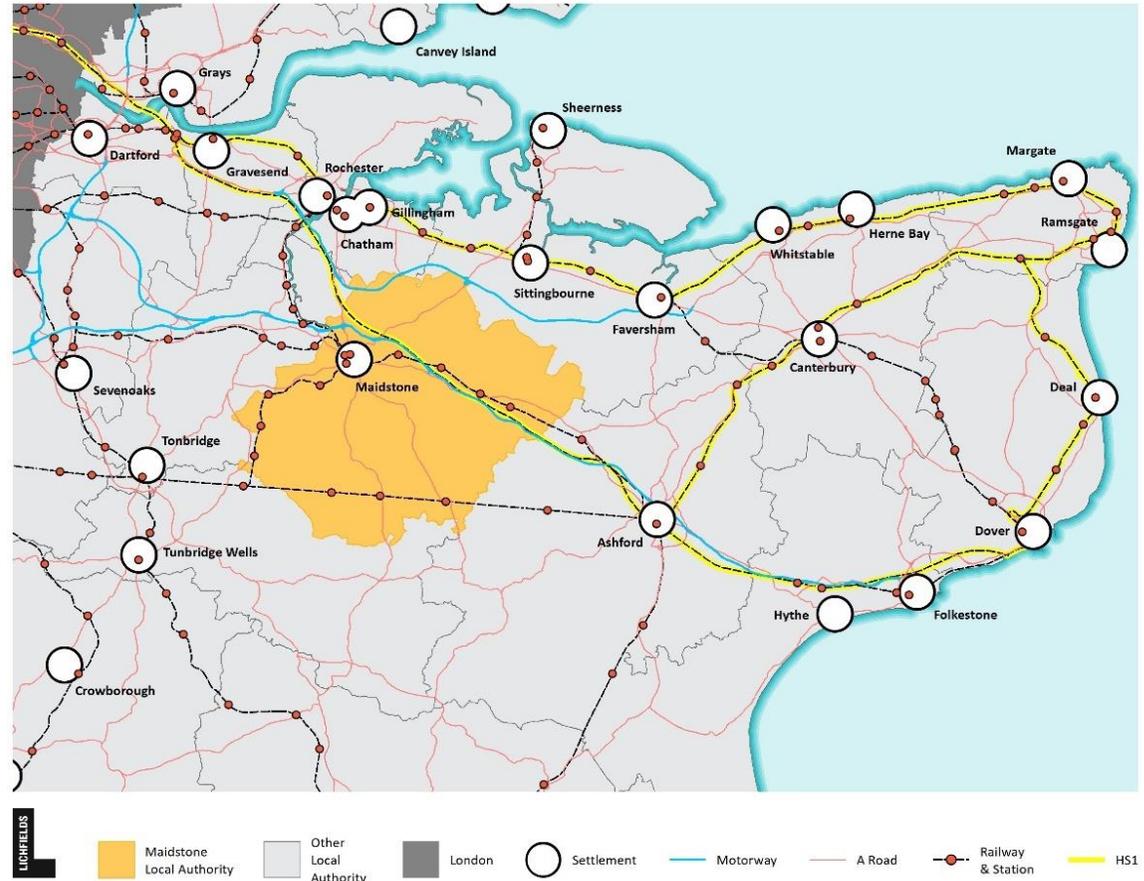
The Maidstone urban area, located in the north west of the Borough, has a strong commercial and retail town centre, with Maidstone comprising one of the largest retail centres in the South East.

A substantial rural hinterland surrounds the urban area, part of which enjoys designation due to its high landscape and environmental quality. The Borough encompasses a small section of the metropolitan green belt (1.3%), and 27% of the borough forms part of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

The borough is strategically located between the Channel Tunnel and London with direct connections to both via the M20 and M2 motorways. Three central railway stations in the town connect to London, Ashford, Tonbridge and to the Medway Towns.

Whilst the Borough is relatively self-contained from a labour, housing and commercial market point of view, it's location at the heart of Kent means that it shares strong economic relationships with its neighbouring areas, in particular the 'Malling' part of Tonbridge and Malling and parts of Medway and Swale.

Figure 1: Maidstone in Context



Source: Lichfields analysis

### 3. State of the Local Economy

The Borough benefits from some inherent economic strengths but also faces some key constraints to growth that are likely to be exacerbated by Covid-19 impacts.

#### Summary SWOT Analysis

Our analysis of recent economic trends within the Borough identifies a ‘patchwork’ of varied economic characteristics and performance, with significant scope to boost the Borough’s contribution to Kent’s wider growth over the coming years. Maidstone has seen its jobs base grow and diversify, has accommodated significant enterprise growth and healthy rates of business survival as well as consistently strong population growth in recent years, suggesting that Maidstone remains an attractive place to live as well as work. But it must also address a series of underlying economic weaknesses and challenges to boost workplace productivity in line with regional and national averages, and this includes upskilling the local resident base to more effectively capture high value growth opportunities and job growth in future.

This EDS has been informed by a refreshed evidence base that establishes the economic baseline for the Borough in terms of current economic performance and recent trends. Key findings from this are summarised in the **‘State of the Nation’ report** included at Annex 1.

#### Strengths

- Strong employment growth (exceeding Local Plan creation target)
- Significant growth in enterprises in recent years, coupled with healthy levels of business survival
- High levels of economic activity
- Proximity to key infrastructure assets incl High Speed One and M20
- County town central location and business capital of Kent
- Strong population growth and attractiveness as a place to live

#### Weaknesses

- Declining working age population in recent years
- Relatively low local workforce productivity
- Less highly qualified workforce than the South East, particularly at NVQ level 4 and above
- Lower than average earnings (workplace and resident-based)
- Pockets of deprivation continue to persist in urban areas
- Relatively poor connectivity in town centre and southern area of Borough

#### Opportunities

- Above average levels of workers employed in higher paid occupations
- Strong levels of self-employment and business start-up present opportunities for increasing entrepreneurial activity locally
- Significant scale of planned housing/population growth across Kent
- Enhanced connectivity through Thameslink services
- Significant regeneration opportunities within Maidstone town

#### Threats

- Covid-19 impacts including risk of increasing unemployment
- Uncertainty around recovery profile for Borough’s key sectors
- Resident skills may not be sufficient to take advantage of higher value job opportunities
- Decreasing high street and retail trade activity
- Competition from ambitious growth plans across wider sub-region

Source: Lichfields analysis

## 3. Covid-19 Economic Effects

**This Strategy presents a timely opportunity to bridge short term Covid-19 related responses with longer term aspirations to transform Maidstone's economy.**

### Implications of Covid-19

The outbreak of Covid-19 has had a significant effect on the Borough's economy, with impacts still unfolding as the economic disruption continues:

- Many of the Borough's businesses continue to experience severe disruption to day-to-day operations, and a negative impact from the pandemic on sales/revenues and future orders.
- Across the local economy overall, over a quarter of Maidstone's working residents had been furloughed through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, and while local unemployment has risen sharply, the full effects are likely to be masked by the extension of government support schemes.
- Visits to retail, recreation and workplace venues are still significantly lower than 'normal', posing economic challenges for the town centre in particular.
- The impact on individual sectors has varied significantly reflecting the extent to which lockdown measures and ongoing restrictions have forced some industries to temporarily 'shut down'. Around one quarter of Maidstone's local employment, output and business base fall within sectors at highest risk from short term economic harm from Covid-19; hospitality, recreation and retail have been amongst those sectors hardest hit, but have also driven much of the job growth recorded in the Borough over recent years and remain locally significant.
- Covid-19 forecasts from Experian (prepared in Summer 2020) imply a short term economic impact equivalent to £575 million and 4,000 jobs across the Borough during 2020, taking at least two years for the local economy to recover to pre Covid-19 levels of economic activity.

The 'real time' nature of the evolving economic situation emphasises the need to review new data and intelligence as it emerges, to monitor impacts as they unfold, and use this to review the Economic Development Strategy response on a timely basis.

### Adapting to a 'New Normal'

Although it is still too early to understand fully how the pandemic and resulting structural changes may affect the longer term economic growth prospects for the Borough, it is likely that the Covid-19 pandemic will induce and accelerate some key structural economic changes that will influence patterns of local economic growth and development, some of which are summarised below:

- Covid-19 has brought about asymmetrical impacts across different communities, reinforcing the logic for **place-based and people-centred approaches** to help ensure a balanced and inclusive recovery.
- The distribution of the economic and social consequences of the health emergency have been strongly influenced by factors such as sector composition, labour market profile and trading relationships; these will require **renewed focus in recovery planning**, and the way in which we aim to support productivity growth in Maidstone.
- The **rediscovery of "proximity" and the "local"** during the course of the pandemic has accelerated focus on enhancing accessibility and connectivity across new and existing communities, for example with regard to access to green space, local services, and maintaining work-life balance.
- The pandemic has been a major game changer for the **pace of digitalisation**, and will remain a key component of the "new normal"; this has major implications, for example, on the way in which businesses operate and use space, and commuting patterns for workers, but also heightens challenges such as digital exclusion for some groups.
- **Environmental awareness** has been significantly raised, and with government policy now focused on "green recovery". These factors give the opportunity to accelerate Maidstone's ambitions in terms of clean growth, sustainable travel and natural capital.

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## 4. Our Economic Vision

**Our Strategy is guided by an overarching vision for the Borough's economy in 2030 to articulate its economic potential and unique growth opportunities.**

### Our Economic Vision for Maidstone

Our new economic vision builds upon existing strengths and unique assets where the Borough already has competitive advantage but also where there is significant scope to use these assets to drive prosperity amongst Maidstone's residents and businesses in the future. We want to maximise our economic credentials to 'lead the way' within a competitive environment, secure the infrastructure investment we need to realise our potential, and deliver a step change in economic performance and prosperity that reaches and benefits all parts of our community in a genuinely inclusive way so that no-one is left behind.

It focuses on the success of Maidstone as a business location, but sets a bolder ambition about the role it can play in future as the 'the' business capital of Kent. This is supported by a palpable spirit of enterprise evident across the whole economy and a complementary mix of both urban and rural economic opportunity that is genuinely unrivalled across Kent and the wider region.

Our vision also responds to identified weaknesses and challenges to growth such as relatively low workforce productivity locally and pockets of persistent socio-economic deprivation amongst some communities in the Borough.

Reflecting the 'local growth' golden thread running through all aspects of Council activity and service delivery, our overall economic ambition complements the wider vision for a 'Borough that works for everyone' set out in Maidstone Borough Council's Strategic Plan.

This is underpinned by five strategic priorities that are explored on the following pages where we identify the rationale for each priority and a series of enabling factors – where the Council is likely to have greatest influence – to overcome key challenges to economic prosperity and set a path to achieving our vision for Maidstone in 2030.



*By 2030 Maidstone will excel as the 'Business Capital of Kent', defined by a strong entrepreneurial spirit, an unrivalled urban-rural economic offer, and which offers opportunities for all of our communities.*

## 4. Strategic Priorities

Underpinning this overall vision are five key priorities around which our plan for future activities to realise Maidstone's economic potential is framed.

### Economic Vision:

By 2030 Maidstone will excel as the 'Business Capital of Kent', defined by a strong entrepreneurial spirit, an unrivalled urban-rural economic offer, and which offers opportunities for all of our communities.

### Five strategic priorities for realising our vision:



#### Open for business

Maximising our economic role at the heart of Kent and a strong public sector base to create a positive and entrepreneurial environment in which businesses can grow and thrive



#### A greener, more productive economy

Diversifying our economic base and boosting productivity by growing high value activity, including existing strengths in life sciences and new opportunities for clean growth



#### A thriving rural economy

Realising the potential of our rural assets (such as sector strengths in viticulture and tourism) and overcoming barriers to growth through enhanced infrastructure and connectivity



#### Inclusive growth

Taking an inclusive approach to growth to ensure that all of our communities can benefit from economic success and prosperity



#### Destination Maidstone town centre

Re-imagining Maidstone's town centre as a vibrant, mixed-use destination with a welcoming economy befitting a modern county town



# Priority 1: Open for Business

## Maximising our economic role at the heart of Kent to create a positive and entrepreneurial environment in which businesses can grow and thrive.

### Rationale

Home to more than 7,000 businesses and nearly 172,000 residents, Maidstone already represents a powerhouse for growth and a popular business location. It has a high business start up rate (at 77 business starts per 10,000 residents aged 16 to 64) indicating that the Borough plays an important role as an incubator of new businesses and innovation; and those businesses that do start in Maidstone have a strong chance of survival.

The pace of business growth has, however, been lagging behind Kent, South East and UK averages over recent years; between 2009 and 2018 the Borough’s business base increased by 18%, representing a lower level of growth than recorded across Kent (20%), the South East (20%) and UK (26%) during this period. We also know from our business surveys that many are suffering significant disruption as a result of Covid-19, with ongoing restrictions effectively forcing key industries such as hospitality, recreation and retail to temporarily ‘shut down’. The short term focus of our strategy must therefore be on business survival and resilience as they gradually adapt to the ‘new normal’, recasting and evolving the local business support offer as Maidstone’s business base transitions from ‘restart’ to ‘recovery’ and eventual growth. Local intelligence suggests that businesses are seeking support around ongoing changes to Covid-19 operational restrictions, EU Transition and help to start-up a new business in response to the growing redundancy situation.

We want to offer a welcoming environment to entrepreneurs by providing the required facilities and floorspace, together with the opportunities to integrate in wider business networks and supply chains and take advantage of the agglomeration economies that already exist in Maidstone to thrive. Recent years have seen the Borough’s stock of business space gradually decline, for instance with local office space reducing by 17% between 2001 and 2019, driven more recently by Permitted Development Rights which has impacted Maidstone town centre’s office role in particular. We need to reverse this trend through a proactive strategy that enforces our credentials as an attractive central business location, providing flexibility to cater for increasingly agile working practices.

The public sector has traditionally provided a strong source of local economic activity reflecting Maidstone’s role as Kent’s county town. Organisations such as Kent County Council and the Borough Council are significant employers in their own right, and in turn support a range of direct and indirect benefits including local spending and procurement opportunities for local businesses. Looking ahead, we want to see a strong public sector at the heart of an open, collaborative and thriving business culture here in Maidstone.

Through the Economic Development Strategy, we want to build on the success of The Business Terrace – the Council’s Growth Accelerator – by continuing to provide state-of-the-art flexible workspace to business start-ups, but also encourage our existing business base to scale-up and attract new business investment through our role as the Business Capital of Kent.



### Economic Drivers & Opportunities

- **North Kent Enterprise Zone:** this provides key business incentives including business rate discounts, fast-track planning applications and affordable commercial rates
- **Covid-19 induced shift towards more localised working:** opportunities to capture business growth locally as commuting to larger economic centres reduces and businesses place greater value on proximity to their workforce and quality of life
- **South East LIS ‘Communities for the Future’ strategic opportunity:** maximising the role of Maidstone’s new garden communities to accommodate vibrant business districts and hubs
- **Thames Estuary Production Corridor:** drawing on existing film and TV production strengths at Maidstone Studios to expand creative sectors locally
- **Maidstone Borough Council’s Strategic Plan 2019-2045:** realising the vision for ‘a thriving place’ that is open to business



### Enabling Factors

- Provision of business premises and land
- Infrastructure and connectivity
- Skills and talent
- Business networks, support and advice
- Placemaking and business environment
- Influencing the public sector to consolidate activity here in the Borough



## Priority 2: A greener, more productive economy

### Diversifying our economic base and boosting productivity by growing high value activity, building on existing sector strengths and growth opportunities.

#### Rationale

Maidstone needs to broaden its economic foundations to not only support business resilience over the short term as the economy recovers from Covid-19, but to also position itself for future growth opportunities over the coming years. Despite some strong indicators of economic performance, the Borough faces a series of underlying economic weaknesses and challenges to boost workplace productivity in line with regional and national averages, driven in part by strong representation of lower value activities such as hospitality, recreation and social care. Our analysis shows that average economic output (GVA) generated by Maidstone's workforce is 21% lower than the equivalent for the South East, 18% lower than the UK and also falls significantly behind many of our neighbours.

We need to diversify the local economy through private sector growth and with it, high quality employment opportunities for our residents. This is reinforced through the National Industrial Strategy and at sub-regional level by the South East LIS, with their emphasis upon driving economic productivity and responding to the global Grand Challenges of ageing society, future of mobility, clean growth and artificial intelligence.

Through this Strategy, we want to harness key growth and innovation opportunities accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic for instance around digital transformation and green recovery, using these to accelerate existing business clusters, development proposals and local business ecosystems, particularly where these align with government economic recovery funding initiatives.

Linked to this and Priority 1, we need to position the Borough to realise distinctive sector growth and innovation opportunities associated with its strategic location within the Kent Science and Innovation and Thames Estuary Production Corridors. Medical technology (and life sciences more generally) represents a key opportunity in this sense, by maximising economic impact from the Maidstone Innovation Centre currently being constructed at the site of the Kent Medical Campus. The Borough's burgeoning viticulture industry could also offer high value growth opportunities around agricultural technology.

As part of the government's plans to 'build back better', we also want to consider emerging productivity opportunities presented by the green recovery agenda which also aligns strongly with the Council's corporate growth priorities around climate emergency and biodiversity and its recently published Biodiversity and Climate Change Action Plan. This could include developing local expertise in low carbon technology, and trialing this as we design and build new developments and communities. This has major implications for the skills our local residents and businesses will need in future to respond to the Net Zero agenda and underpin growth in the green economy, for instance with a key focus on scientific, engineering and technician skills.

#### Economic Drivers & Opportunities



- **Kent Medical Campus and Maidstone Innovation Centre:** immediate opportunity to capture high value sector activity within the Borough and provide the innovation ecosystems to enable this activity to thrive
- **National Industrial Strategy and South East LIS:** imperative to boost productivity and prosperity, with key LIS initiatives such as 'Communities for the Future' providing particular opportunities for Maidstone through the forthcoming development of new garden settlements in the Borough
- **Kent Science and Innovation Corridor:** sub-regional growth initiative for Maidstone Borough to capitalise upon as it seeks to grow and expand innovation clusters locally
- **Government's Ten Point Plan for green economic recovery:** opportunity for Maidstone to play an active role in the 'Green Industrial Revolution' with funding opportunities totaling c.£12 billion announced in Spending Review 2020
- **Maidstone Local Plan Review:** the emerging planning framework and spatial plan for the Borough seeks to allocate new garden settlements which could offer opportunities to diversify our local economic base through innovative design, construction, and through curating high quality business clusters

#### Enabling Factors



- Provision of high quality 'innovation space'
- Skills brokerage and training opportunities
- Facilitating business networks and clusters
- Provision of land for inward investment



## Priority 3: A thriving rural economy

### Realising the potential of our rural assets and overcoming barriers to growth through enhanced infrastructure and connectivity.

#### Rationale

Maidstone accommodates a successful rural economy that provides a vital source of employment for many of the Borough's residents and is home to a network of smaller towns and villages that are important commercial centres in their own right. For instance, the settlements of Lenham, Staplehurst, Marden and Headcorn all accommodate sizeable employment bases and provide critical service functions for their surrounding rural economies.

It is already home to a vibrant mix of industries including manufacturing, agriculture and tourism and an unrivalled portfolio of heritage and visitor assets including Leeds Castle, Stoneacre, Kent Life and Headcorn Aerodrome. Whilst many of our rural businesses have successfully diversified their economic offer over recent years, others offer significant potential for further growth and development over the coming years, in turn helping to diversify the Borough's economic base and boost local productivity.

Particular growth opportunities have been identified around the Borough's burgeoning viticulture industry where Maidstone plays home to some of the UK's leading winemakers including Hush Heath Winery. UK wine has been recognised as a serious business, is one of the fastest growing areas of the UK economy and offers a flexible way for landowners to diversify. For instance, WineGB predicts that the UK's wine growing industry could support 24,000 jobs by 2040, up from 2,100 today, with the 'Wine Garden of England' (in and around Kent) required to play an important role in supporting and enabling this growth. There are opportunities to use vineyard experiences as a central pillar from which other local businesses in tourism and leisure can benefit, creating a self-supporting economic ecosystem, driving up the economic value and contribution made by the Borough's rural tourism sector, and strengthening the Borough's credentials as a tourist destination.

Linked to this, Visit Kent's recent Accommodation Study identifies the increasing trend for experience-based offers; the desire for 'easily accessible rural locations' could be capitalised upon by the Borough's rural locations with higher quality smaller establishments which match the high end offer of attractions such as Leeds Castle and the vineyards. We want to maximise opportunities associated with our central location as a base or gateway to explore the impressive tourism assets that Kent has to offer.

We also know that rural parts of the Borough face particular challenges and barriers to growth and prosperity, so our strategy focuses on enhanced infrastructure provision and connectivity to unlock these opportunities and enable a thriving rural economy. This includes improved road infrastructure within rural areas to enhance business efficiency, for instance through a new Leeds-Langley bypass.

#### Economic Drivers & Opportunities



- **The 'Garden of England' brand:** opportunities for Maidstone's rural businesses to capitalise on a thriving food and drink manufacturing sector in Kent and benefit from the agglomeration effects of a growing cluster. This could include opportunities around agricultural technology, capitalising on the presence of nearby assets such as the East Malling Research Centre
- **Covid-19 induced shift towards more localised working:** with fewer people travelling to larger centres for employment, this presents opportunities to develop networks of sustainable rural business hubs across the Borough
- **Increasing demand for 'staycations' over the short term:** as international travel restrictions continue, the Borough's visitor and hospitality sector stands to benefit from more localised trips and holidays. Opportunities exist to develop a stronger experiential place-based visitor economy offer
- **2050 Kent and Medway Enterprise and Productivity Strategy:** identifies an ambition to be recognised as the 'Clean Garden of England'; this provides a key opportunity for the Borough's rural economy to contribute to a broader focus on clean growth and green recovery as we 'build back better'
- **New National Infrastructure Strategy:** launched as part of Spending Review 2020, this sets out plans to transform the UK's economic infrastructure, supported by the creation of a new infrastructure bank. This provides a timely opportunity to raise the profile of the Borough's rural connectivity constraints and make the case for infrastructure investment

#### Enabling Factors



- Infrastructure, transport and connectivity
- Provision of start-up and grow-on business space
- Supportive local planning policy for rural diversification
- Sector clusters and support networks
- Place promotion and targeted campaigns



## Priority 4: Inclusive growth

# Taking an inclusive approach to growth to ensure that all of our communities can benefit from economic success and prosperity.

### Rationale

Inclusive growth lies at the heart of the Council’s corporate agenda, and is reflected within this Economic Development Strategy through an overarching emphasis on economic opportunity for all; a Borough where everyone can realise their potential.

Whilst the Borough ranks within the least 50% deprived local authorities in England in terms of overall deprivation, some entrenched pockets of socio-economic inequality persist within the urban areas of Maidstone town (for instance within the urban wards of Park Wood, Shepway South, Fant and High Street) with key segments of the Borough’s population particularly vulnerable to the ongoing economic effects of Covid-19 such as unemployment and reduced earnings.

The local Claimant Count – a key indicator of unemployment – has increased sharply following the outbreak of Covid-19, from 2.2% in March 2020 to 5.3% by September 2020, and we need to support those residents most susceptible to economic inactivity and labour market exclusion through targeted skills development, employability support, and over the longer term, by raising aspirations amongst people of all ages, inspiring them to access the labour market and realise their potential.

Issues of social mobility are also prevalent amongst some groups of the local population (such as young people and adults) and this acts as a constraint to economic growth that this strategy seeks to address. The Borough has seen little change in socio-economic inequality over recent years, indicating that an alternative approach is needed to tackle often deep seated, inter-generational challenges and better connect the opportunities associated with a growing economy to our communities. The increased focus on health and wellbeing following the Covid-19 pandemic also has implications for the actions we need to take to ensure our local economy and communities remain resilient.

Skills represents a key determinant of the success of people and places, and our analysis suggests that more of our residents hold no formal qualifications (8.8%) than the equivalent for Kent (7.8%), the South East (5.8%) and the rest of the UK (7.9%). The share of Borough residents holding higher level skills (i.e. NVQ4 and above) also falls behind regional and national averages, indicating scope for much improvement. Through this Strategy we want to work with partners to facilitate a dynamic and agile local skills ecosystem, to ensure that our communities – in particular young people - can access skills and employability support including specific opportunities for re-training, business start-up, and developing digital/e-commerce competencies, working in partnership with key programmes such as the Kent Supported Employment Service. Improved skills and earnings prospects will also have wider knock-on community wellbeing and prosperity benefits, for instance by enabling local residents to enter the housing market.



### Economic Drivers & Opportunities

- **National ‘levelling up’ agenda:** seeks to reduce socio-economic inequality across all parts of the UK, supported by a £4 billion Levelling Up Fund open to all local areas in England. The provides a timely opportunity for Maidstone to make the case for targeted investment to overcome long term deprivation challenges in key pockets of the Borough
- **National Industrial Strategy and South East LIS:** imperative to boost prosperity for all, including by equipping people with the skills and competencies they need to contribute to a more productive economy
- **2050 Kent and Medway Enterprise and Productivity Strategy:** identifies a key priority area to deliver a step change in our future skills base, moving from a level 2-3 economy to a level 3-4 economy
- **Maidstone Borough Council Strategic Plan 2019-2045:** identifies a vision for a vibrant, prosperous, urban and rural community at the heart of Kent where everyone can realise their potential
- **Digital transformation (accelerated by Covid-19):** this poses major implications for future delivery of learning and ways of working, and heightens existing challenges such as digital exclusion for some groups

### Enabling Factors

- Targeted employability and skills support
- Digital infrastructure and connectivity
- Key focus on economic inclusion within all future Council strategies
- School skills and employability programmes
- Job brokerage





## Priority 5: Destination Maidstone town centre

### Re-imagining Maidstone's town centre as a vibrant, mixed-use destination with a welcoming economy befitting a modern county town.

#### Rationale

Like many other parts of the country, Maidstone's town centre has undergone unprecedented change over recent years in response to major structural shifts in the wider retail, leisure and office markets; a process that has been rapidly accelerated more recently by Covid-19. Visits to retail, recreation and workplace venues in the town centre are still significantly lower than 'normal', and it is unlikely that pre-pandemic patterns of activity will return in the same way. Yet it remains an important economic centre, the Borough's largest employment location and a significant focus for future investment; the scale of the town centre's existing economic contribution and catalytic potential makes its renaissance a critical underpinning component of this strategy, given the opportunities it provides to facilitate business growth, innovation and a more diversified, inclusive economic base.

To remain relevant and well-loved by the communities it serves, the town centre is in need of rejuvenation, future oriented thinking and support to respond to evolving consumer habits and emerging opportunities to repurpose the built environment. In particular, it will need to diversify its existing offer to include a broader range of leisure and 'experienced-focused' uses, commensurate with its county town role and status. The portfolio of Opportunity Areas provide significant spatial capacity in this regard, supported by a forthcoming Area Action Plan and ambitious town centre regeneration strategy. Key sites such as Maidstone East offer real potential to strengthen our position as the public sector capital of Kent through the development of high quality shared co-working space. A forthcoming review of the benefits of the twilight and night time economy will be undertaken by the Council as part of work on the Town Centre Area Action Plan.

Our town centre has a rich history and impressive heritage assets, alongside a substantial number of active arts and cultural groups, and a thriving music scene. As set out in the Borough's Arts & Culture Strategy, to capitalise on the potential of the town centre sector, and to compete with successful creative hubs in Medway, Canterbury and Folkestone, we need to support our existing businesses and arts/cultural groups, while continuing to attract and retain new talent. We have a strong base with the Maidstone Studios and an opportunity to benefit from the Thames Estuary Production Corridor, and the Strategy identifies a number of opportunities to more actively embed arts and culture within the town centre's economic transformation, for instance by creating a cultural hub around Archbishops' Palace, Stables, All Saints Church and Len House, making more active use of the River Medway, and redeveloping Powerhub/Granada House/Len House for use as messy workshops, exhibitions, rehearsal and performance space. Hazlitt Theatre already provides a platform for local amateur dramatics, and alongside Maidstone's three museums, could play an anchor role in driving a more vibrant creative and cultural economy within the town centre.

Over the shorter term, we want to boost local consumer demand and confidence by attracting workers, visitors and spending back to the town centre through promotional activity, local purchasing campaigns and a series of events and activities delivered by the Council to bring local people together and help to re-establish community ownership of our town centre public space.

Maidstone Economic Development Strategy



#### Economic Drivers & Opportunities

- **Forthcoming Town Centre Action Plan:** provides a timely opportunity to develop a transformational programme of investment to deliver an improved retail, leisure and cultural offer, focused around Key Opportunity Areas and regeneration sites in Maidstone town centre
- **Planning reform:** to include increased planning flexibility for town centre uses through a new 'Class E' and extended Permitted Development Rights
- **One Maidstone Business Improvement District:** working on behalf of town centre traders to promote the town centre and visitor experience, the BID has a key role to play in curating a thriving mixed-use destination
- **Maidstone Arts & Culture Strategy 2019 – 2024:** underlines the strong appreciation by Maidstone Borough Council that revitalising arts and culture can help us all achieve a sense of place and pride in the town centre
- **Rediscovery of the 'local' as a result of Covid-19:** a renewed focus on local economic participation provides immediate opportunities for Maidstone town centre to capitalise on more localised patterns of spending, working, and in due course, socialising



#### Enabling Factors

- Placemaking and public realm
- Proactive planning policy (inc. forthcoming town centre AAP)
- Provision of start-up and grow-on business space
- Connectivity and accessibility
- Town centre working group

# Structure

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Strategic Context
- 3 State of the Local Economy
- 4 Our Economic Vision and Strategy
- 5 Delivery and Action Plan**

## 5. Delivering our Strategy

**We look forward to working together with local partners as we set out to deliver this Economic Development Strategy for Maidstone.**

### Working in Partnership

This Economic Development Strategy sets out our economic vision for the Borough of Maidstone through to 2030 and how we are going to build on our economic potential and unique growth opportunities to achieve it.

We recognise that our vision is ambitious and the outcomes we are seeking to achieve will require us to work in close collaboration with our partners and key stakeholders in the Borough and further afield. We have a key role in the Borough through our direct service delivery as well as the services we commission. We are keen to take an active role in shaping the Borough through investing our resources in regeneration as well as leading the development of new communities. We will do all this whilst engaging and listening to our communities.

The Council's approach to delivering this Economic Development Strategy over the next few years will focus on:

- Taking a proactive role in creating sustainable communities and leading master planning, guided by a new Local Plan for the Borough to 2037;
- Working with partners to get infrastructure planned, funded and delivered;
- Promoting inward investment in the Borough, for example by building a new innovation centre for Maidstone at the Kent Medical Campus;
- Working with partners to redevelop and deliver plans for key development sites, including a series of Opportunity Areas in Maidstone town centre; and
- Intervening where necessary in the market, to deliver key employment sites.

On the following pages we explore each of our strategic priorities in turn, and detail future actions that we will start to take to achieve our vision. This broadly follows a three-stage approach to reflect short, medium and longer term programmes of activity over the next five years.



## 5. Action Plan

For each strategic priority, we have identified a five year action plan to shape activity as we start to deliver our Economic Development Strategy.

Strategic Priority	Action	Milestones	Resources	Lead	Broad Timescale
 <p><b>Priority 1: Open for Business</b></p>	Recast and evolve the local business support offer as Maidstone's business base transitions from 'restart' to 'recover' and 'renew'	To include a locally responsive business resilience programme with targeted support to enable firms to adapt to new technologies (such as enhancing digital and e-commerce capabilities), diversify or access new markets (including exporting opportunities) and supporting business start-ups amongst residents re-entering the labour market as a result of Covid-19	Existing MBC resources plus partner resources and funding	MBC in partnership with Kent & Medway Growth Hub, Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce and via groups such as Maidstone Economic Business Partnership and venues such as The Business Terrace	Short Term
	Signpost support and practical guidance for businesses on re-opening and resuming trading as a result of Covid-19	Continue to signpost support and practical guidance from government to help businesses re-open/re-start, implement social distancing measures as these change and enable businesses to respond to, and take advantage of, new trading relationships with Europe as the UK's transition period comes to an end this year	Existing MBC resources plus partner resources and intelligence	MBC in partnership with key business support providers/organisations	Short-Medium Term
	Develop an investment prospectus to promote the Borough regionally and nationally as an excellent location for inward investment, business expansion and quality of life	Revisit the existing 'Invest in Maidstone' website and refresh to create a new brand identity, working with partners to capture up-to-date information on the business credentials of the Borough. This provides a timely opportunity to promote the Borough's business strengths as the economy adjusts to a 'new normal' post Covid-19	Existing MBC resources	MBC Economic Development Team	Medium Term
	Consider investing in industrial and warehouse premises to help de-risk new employment sites coming forward	Any such future activity would be required to meet the minimum targets and parameters set out in the Council's Capital Programme Medium Term Financial Strategy Report to Policy and Committee (January 2021)	Existing MBC resources plus partner resources and funding	MBC in partnership with potential workspace providers/operators, drawing on LEP funding opportunities where available	Medium-Long Term

**Timescale: Short Term: Over the next 12 months; Medium Term: Next 1-3 years; Long Term: Next 3-5 years.**

## 5. Action Plan

For each strategic priority, we have identified a five year action plan to shape activity as we start to deliver our Economic Development Strategy.

Strategic Priority	Action	Milestones	Resources	Lead	Broad Timescale
 <p><b>Priority 2: A greener, more productive economy</b></p>	Explore specific opportunities for Maidstone to contribute to and help deliver broader initiatives to transform productivity and prosperity across Kent & Medway and the wider South East	Work with regional partners to explore specific opportunities including the South East LIS 'Communities for the future' strategic opportunity and Kent Science and Innovation and Thames Estuary Production Corridors, building on the Borough's strategic location and existing assets (such as Maidstone Studios, Kent Medical Campus/Maidstone Innovation Centre)	Existing MBC resources plus partner resources and intelligence	MBC in partnership with KCC, SELEP, SE Creative Economy Network	Medium Term
	Develop a clear growth and investment proposition for key high value sector growth opportunities locally	This should seek to harness key growth and innovation opportunities generated by the pandemic (such as medical technology linked to Kent Medical Campus and clean growth), using these to accelerate existing business clusters, development proposals and local business ecosystems, particularly where these align with government economic recovery funding initiatives	Existing MBC resources	MBC Economic Development Team	Medium-Long Term
	Develop a package of sustainable infrastructure and low carbon capital projects to encourage a Borough-wide shift to a net zero carbon economy	This could include projects to both support existing businesses reduce their carbon footprint and operate more sustainably and to attract new 'green' inward investment to the Borough, for instance by developing and trialing low carbon construction technology as we design and build new communities. This should tap into government green recovery funding opportunities such as the Green Recovery Challenge Fund	Existing MBC resources plus partner resources and funding	MBC with key partners such as Low Carbon Kent, SELEP and Kent Wildlife Trust	Medium-Long Term
	Develop a portfolio of 'shovel ready' infrastructure projects to kick start investment, unlock and stimulate economic activity within the Borough	Engaging with key partners such as the LEP to leverage funding opportunities from government funding packages as they emerge, such as the forthcoming £4bn Levelling Up Fund and associated with the National Infrastructure Strategy. Keep this package of projects updated on an ongoing basis	Existing MBC resources plus partner resources and funding	MBC working in partnership with SELEP, KCC	Short-Medium-Long Term

**Timescale: Short Term: Over the next 12 months; Medium Term: Next 1-3 years; Long Term: Next 3-5 years.**

## 5. Action Plan

For each strategic priority, we have identified a five year action plan to shape activity as we start to deliver our Economic Development Strategy.

Strategic Priority	Action	Milestones	Resources	Lead	Broad Timescale
 <p><b>Priority 3: A thriving rural economy</b></p>	Ensure that Council policy recognises the Borough's emerging reputation for its food and drink based economic offer and explicitly supports rural economic growth and diversification	Through forthcoming strategic policy, reference growing sub sectors, and those that offer particular development opportunities such as viticulture, to ensure that any specific requirements and growth needs are reflected and supported as far as possible	Existing MBC resources	MBC Economic Development and planning teams	Short-Medium Term
	Support the roll out of high-quality digital connectivity across the Borough's rural communities	Work with Kent County Council to ensure the roll out of high-quality digital connectivity across the Borough's rural communities to facilitate access to home working, e-commerce and learning opportunities, particularly as virtual working and learning becomes part of the 'new normal' following Covid-19	Existing MBC resources plus partner resources and funding	MBC in partnership with KCC	Short-Medium Term
	Develop a new, integrated tourism strategy for the Borough to grow and maximise Maidstone's visitor economy in a sustainable way which respects our unique environment	This should include a single destination management offer for the Borough to ensure that we promote our collective heritage, cultural and environmental assets and create opportunities for linked trips and encourage visitors to stay longer. In the short term, this should include targeted support for the Borough's hospitality businesses to safely reopen in 2021 and capitalise on increased demand for UK 'staycations'	Existing MBC resources plus partner resources and funding	MBC in partnership with tourism providers, Visit Maidstone, Visit Kent	Medium-Long Term
	Coordinate efforts with other Kent local authorities and relevant sector umbrella organisations to help promote and support the growth of key rurally based sectors with particular growth potential, such as winemaking	There are recognised benefits from undertaking this sector development activity at a 'larger-than-local-level', particularly when it comes to supply chain development and building on the already strong 'Wine Garden of England' brand to maximise the economic value and contribution of wine tourism to the area	Existing MBC resources plus partner resources and funding	MBC working with partners such as Produced in Kent, Locate in Kent, Wine Garden of England, KCC	Medium-Long Term

**Timescale: Short Term: Over the next 12 months; Medium Term: Next 1-3 years; Long Term: Next 3-5 years.**

## 5. Action Plan

For each strategic priority, we have identified a five year action plan to shape activity as we start to deliver our Economic Development Strategy.

Strategic Priority	Action	Milestones	Resources	Lead	Broad Timescale
 <p><b>Priority 4: Inclusive growth</b></p>	Develop an economic inclusion strategy for the Borough to set out how the Council, working with partners, will seek to shape a more inclusive economy in Maidstone	The strategy should examine how MBC will work with communities to shape local places, value and support local businesses and bring quality and fair employment opportunities to residents and tackle disadvantage in the labour market. Over the first 12 months, this should focus on those communities that have been disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 pandemic to understand their short term needs, with a key initial focus on health and wellbeing	Existing MBC resources plus additional resources/funding likely to be needed	MBC (via Inclusion Board)	Short-Medium-Long Term
	Ensure that local residents – in particular young people - can access skills and employability support including specific opportunities for re-training, business start-up, and developing digital/e-commerce competencies	Ensuring responsive skills provision by working with local education and training providers, the Maidstone Economic Business Partnership, SELEP, Kent and Medway Economic Partnership and others, and continuing to leverage government support through the Plan for Jobs	Existing MBC resources plus partner resources and funding	MBC in partnership with local education and training providers, Maidstone Economic Business Partnership, SELEP, Kent & Medway Economic Partnership	Short-Medium Term
	Capitalise upon local development projects as opportunities for skills development and training	This could include promoting the use of government programmes such as the Kickstart Scheme as well as apprenticeships and local labour initiatives including modern methods of construction within the housing sector, supported by the Council's emerging Local Labour Policy within the Local Plan review	Existing MBC resources plus partner resources and funding	MBC Economic Development, planning and development management teams	Short-Medium-Long Term
	Engage people with community-based learning	Pilot a digital inclusion programme in Maidstone to engage people with community-based learning, offering digital skills as part of a package of support based on an individual's need	Existing MBC resources plus additional resources/funding likely to be needed	MBC in partnership with local Colleges and potentially a digital inclusion organisation such as Good Things Foundation	Medium-Long Term

**Timescale: Short Term: Over the next 12 months; Medium Term: Next 1-3 years; Long Term: Next 3-5 years.**

## 5. Action Plan

For each strategic priority, we have identified a five year action plan to shape activity as we start to deliver our Economic Development Strategy.

Strategic Priority	Action	Milestones	Resources	Lead	Broad Timescale
 <p><b>Priority 5: Destination Maidstone town centre</b></p>	Boost local consumer demand and confidence by attracting footfall, tourists and spending back to the town centre	This could involve promotional activity, local purchasing campaigns and community projects; an 'open for business' campaign to publicise businesses, offers and events as town centre businesses reopen as Covid-19 lockdown restrictions ease. To include a series of Council delivered events and activities in the town centre (including live music, children's trail and artisan market)	Existing MBC resources plus partner resources and funding	MBC in partnership with One Maidstone Business Improvement District	Short-Medium Term
	Support a thriving creative and cultural business base and visitor economy offer in Maidstone town	Work with local partners through targeted business support, skills development opportunities and by reducing barriers to market entry for smaller scale enterprises, for instance through facilitating pop-up 'makers markets' in vacant high street spaces	Existing MBC resources plus partner resources and funding	MBC in partnership with key sector representatives, Maidstone Economic Business Partnership, South East Creative Economy Network and key town centre organisations such as Maidstone Museums	Short-Medium Term
	Repurpose the town centre as a cultural and leisure hub befitting a modern county town	Promote key opportunity sites identified in the Local Plan Review and forthcoming town centre regeneration strategy to achieve our vision	Existing MBC resources	MBC Economic Development and planning teams	Short-Medium-Long Term
	Explore how Covid-19 has impacted and accelerated trends already underway pre-pandemic and coordinate a package of support and investment to re-imagine our town centre as a thriving economic hub	Establish a high streets working group to oversee this work, feeding into the forthcoming Town Centre Action Plan and drawing on a growing resource library being coordinated by the national High Streets Task Force	Existing MBC resources plus partner resources and funding	MBC with representatives from key town centre sector groups and organisations such as One Maidstone, KCC	Medium-Long Term

**Timescale: Short Term: Over the next 12 months; Medium Term: Next 1-3 years; Long Term: Next 3-5 years.**

# **Annex 1**

## **State of the Nation Report**

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