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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Ashford Borough Council and Ashford’s Future commissioned Shared Intelligence (SI) to prepare a Strategic Economic Framework and Action Plan for the Borough. The Framework has been developed through an extensive programme of research and stakeholder engagement and suggests priority actions for the next three years. In addition, in light of the current economic climate, the Framework considers the implications of the recession and how Ashford can best prepare for the recovery.

2. The overarching purpose of the Framework is to provide a platform for the Council, Ashford’s Future and the key partners to agree their priorities and to sign up to a programme of coordinated actions that will create the right conditions for Ashford to achieve its ambitious population and jobs growth over the next 20 years. The Framework is accompanied by a three-year Action Plan which considers the actions required to deliver the identified strategic priorities.

3. The Framework recognises that Ashford’s economy has expanded rapidly over the last decade, experiencing remarkable growth and success in terms of population, employment and business growth. At the same time, more needs to be done to raise qualification levels, increase workforce productivity and support wage growth.

4. The significant infrastructure investments that have already been made, together with the arrival of high speed domestic rail services, create a real opportunity for Ashford to become the smart choice for businesses. In order to achieve this there is a need to provide a suitable range of high quality employment sites and premises to stimulate further growth and encourage the development of knowledge based sector specialisms.
5. Longer term, Ashford has the opportunity to become the economic powerhouse of Kent, playing a distinctive role in the South East and Kent economy and capitalising upon its access to London and mainland Europe. To deliver the Borough’s ambitious vision, as well as the targets for housing and employment growth, there is a need for a shared set of economic priorities and a sustained programme of public sector actions.

6. This Framework suggests five overarching strategic priorities which will be owned by Ashford’s Future Partnership and progress against which will be regularly monitored by the Board and Council Executive:

1. Maximising the opportunities for business attraction and growth arising from the introduction of the domestic high speed train service;
2. Securing infrastructure improvements that will stimulate employment creation opportunities;
3. Accelerating plans for the Commercial Quarter and enhancing the town centre;
4. Establishing an effective and responsive dialogue with Ashford’s top employers; and
5. Addressing Ashford’s skills deficit, enhancing the further and higher education offer and promoting work force development.
INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Strategic Economic Framework

1.1. Ashford Borough Council and Ashford’s Future commissioned Shared Intelligence (Si) to prepare a Strategic Economic Framework and Action Plan for the borough. This framework proposes an approach to maximising Ashford’s economic potential, particularly in the light of the impact of high speed rail services; aligns with and builds on existing strategies and policy documents; identifies agreed priorities and sets out a number of clear recommendations for the Council, Ashford’s Future and partners to consider.

1.2. The Framework suggests priority actions for the next three years, as a means of securing and delivering commitments from partners. In addition, in light of the current economic climate, the Framework considers the implications of the recession and how Ashford can best prepare for the recovery.

1.3. The overarching purpose of the Framework is to provide a platform for the Council, Ashford’s Future and the key partners to agree their priorities and to sign up to a programme of coordinated actions that will create the right conditions for Ashford to achieve its ambitious population and jobs growth over the next 20 years.

Developing the Framework

1.4. Si have worked closely with the Council, Ashford’s Future and partners to devise and implement an effective process of research and consultation to ensure that the Framework is based on a solid evidence base, which has been developed and tested with partners, ensuring that stakeholders have a real opportunity to inform the priorities and identify the key actions required.

1.5. This has been a participative process involving three stages:

- Inception, baseline and policy review. The key output from this stage was a full Baseline Report which provided a socioeconomic assessment of Ashford. The key conclusions of the Baseline Report were discussed with the project steering group in June 2009.

- Stakeholder engagement. Flowing from the baseline series of key themes were identified to guide the stakeholder consultation process and Framework development. Round table discussions were held for each of these themes with an invited list of participants selected for their capacity to contribute to the development of the Framework. In addition, consultation meetings were held with key individuals who could not attend the round table discussions of where follow-up information or clarification was necessary.

1 These themes were: Building on success; Securing new investment; Responding to the recession; Strengthening the economic base; Developing the rural economy; and Building a competitive workforce.
Framework development. Building on the Baseline Report and the outcomes of the round table discussions and subsequent consultation, Si drew up the Framework for discussion with the project steering group, the Council and Ashford's Future. The consultation process informed the development of the Framework's structure and content, with the six themes which had formed the basis of the round table discussions being moulded and merged into a new action-oriented programme of priorities and challenges.

Consultation. Following preparation of the draft Framework in September 2009, consultation documents were sent to approximately 160 invited consultees. Businesses were encouraged to take part by promotion of the consultation through the Chamber of Commerce and the Town Centre Partnership. As well as this direct mailing Ashford Borough Council released a press release providing details of the consultation to the general public. The consultation documents are available on a dedicated page on the council website and the consultation was featured as a news item on the website landing page.

The Structure of the Framework Document

1.6. Following this introduction, chapter 2 looks at the journey Ashford has made in recent years in terms of population and jobs growth, investment, transport infrastructure and image. Drawing upon the supporting socio-economic baseline, which is published as a separate report, the chapter captures the remarkable economic and demographic trends as well as the “story line” which describes the policy drivers, the key investment and infrastructure projects already in place and the way in which Ashford’s public and private sector partners have responded to the challenges of growth. The chapter also identifies those challenges that remain as well as the longer term vision for Ashford and sets out the high level strategic priorities for economic development.

1.7. In light of the identified strategic priorities, chapters 3-7 set out the rationale for action under five organising themes: delivering Ashford’s plans for employment and housing growth; enhancing the supply of high quality office and employment space; supporting business growth and competitiveness; building a competitive workforce for the future; and developing the Ashford offer.

1.8. Each of these chapters provides further detail on the context, trends, prospects and challenges relevant to each theme. The chapters also identify current and future actions which will address the key challenges associated with each theme.

1.9. Chapter 8 takes the form of a three-year Action Plan which assembles the key actions, from across the Framework, that are required to support the strategic priorities.
Ashford is a rapidly growing town in the heart of Kent and a town which has experienced remarkable growth and success in recent years with 5000 homes and 4000 jobs being delivered. Ashford’s urban dynamism and rural attractiveness, combined with exceptional connectivity help define the town’s unique offer and its distinctive role in East Kent. Moving forward, Ashford needs to develop as a high quality, sustainable borough at the heart of the East Kent sub-region.

2.1. Ashford is one of the UK’s designated government growth areas, well connected to the South East, the rest of the UK, and mainland Europe via the M20, A20 and A28, domestic rail services, and the international rail link to Paris and Brussels. Both domestic and international links are soon to be upgraded with the opening of the high speed train services to London and Europe. Journey times to London will be cut from over one hour to 37 minutes. These links give Ashford a major competitive advantage, both in terms of the access this provides to the London economy, but also to mainland Europe. These connections help define Ashford’s offer and will be vital to the future growth of its economy.

Key successes

2.2. Ashford is home to 23,000 more people and 9,000 more jobs than in the 1990’s. It is a very entrepreneurial borough and has a hard working population with high rates of economic activity. Ashford is fast becoming one of the best connected towns in the UK with new motorway and high speed train links and it has attracted some major investments in retail, business park and leisure facilities. Ashford has also led the way in investing in super fast broadband and in future proofing proposals for further development to ensure that digital connectivity increasing becomes one of Ashford’s competitive advantages.

2.3. Ashford’s economy has expanded rapidly over the last decade, with the majority of new jobs in transport & communications, retail, distribution and construction. The number of businesses has also increased at a faster rate than the regional average, driven by a rapid increase in the number of micro-businesses in business services.

2.4. Ashford has also been successful in attracting new people into the area. Population growth has been impressive, increasing by 23% between 1987 and 2007 which is more than double the growth rate in Kent, the South East and Great Britain. Ashford has laid the ground for further growth being one of the few local authorities across the South East with an adopted LDF Core Strategy.

2.5. Over recent years the labour market has been ‘tight’ with high levels of employment and economic activity. The employment rate in 2008 was significantly higher than the Kent and the South East averages. Correspondingly, levels of unemployment and economic inactivity are low.

2.6. The level of economic inactivity in Ashford is lower than that seen in the region and the UK; in 2008 just 12% of local residents were classed as economically inactive compared to regional and national averages of 18% and 21% respectively.

2.7. Business density in 2008 in Ashford is notably higher than the Kent, the regional and the national averages. This indicates a strong local economy; more businesses mean more opportunities for supply chain links and collaboration. Where firms are in competition, it can help to drive productivity growth.

2.8. There is a strong entrepreneurial culture, exhibited in high levels of business start ups and high levels of self employment. Levels of self-employment, at 12% of the working age population, are above regional and national

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2 1998-2007, Annual Business Inquiry, ONS
3 1987-2007, Mid-year Population Estimates, ONS
averages. While there is evidence ‘churn’ with high rates of VAT de-registrations, business start up rates are greater than the Kent, regional and national figures – there were 56 new VAT business registrations per 10,000 resident adults in Ashford, compared with 43 in Kent and 48 in the South East.  

2.9. Ashford has also been successful at attracting significant levels of inward investment in recent years. Ashford is branded as “Best Placed” and is marketing itself as a highly competitive business location in the heart of Kent, with the advantages of high-speed access to Europe and great connections to the rest of the UK. The key features of Ashford’s offer include:

- Connectivity: Within 2 hours of Paris, within 90 minutes of Brussels and 57 minutes from Lille; and now just 37 minutes from London;
- Cost Competition: Office rents are up to 68% cheaper than Central London;
- Inward Investment Success: compelling case studies from recent investors;
- Lifestyle: Attractive town and country living, sporting facilities and shopping;
- Location: In the heart of Kent, the fastest growing town between London and Europe;
- Workforce: 70,000 workers within 20 minutes of Ashford;
- Industrial Structure: A diverse business base of 5,000 businesses employing 46,000 people with key strengths in key sectors for the future.

2.10. Considerable investment has taken place to improve the attractiveness and accessibility of Ashford Town Centre – the ring road, County Square and the Stour Centre. The motorway network has seen recent improvements at Junction 10 of the M20, with planned improvements for Junction 9 and the new junction 10a. Additionally, £16.5m of DfT/HCA Community Infrastructure Fund money has been agreed to build Victoria Way, the road to the south of the town centre.

2.11. In addition to significant investment in infrastructure, positive achievements so far include:

- The Eureka Business Park at Junction 9 – outline planning permission granted for 1,000,000 sq ft of office space, building work underway, with phase one complete;
- Eureka Leisure Park – including development of a 74 bed Premier Inn and Beefeater restaurant complex;
- The Designer Outlet – the only centre in the country financially stable for the first quarter of 2009;
- Waitrose – under construction on a site at the edge of the town centre to be open by December 2009; and
- County Square – expanded and refurbished retail centre at the heart of Ashford town centre.

2.12. There are also improvements being made to enhance the quality of facilities, the public realm and building work in developments taking place in Ashford. Examples include the completion of the Singleton Environment Centre (a sustainable community resource); the creation of the largest shared space in the UK; recent planning permission for 1,600 more new homes; and the establishment of a Strategic Sites Team to support the planning process for major proposals for key sites across the borough.

However challenges remain…

2.13. Despite the remarkable growth, Ashford’s economy is still characterised by comparatively low value added sectors, labour productivity, average earnings and skills levels. The recession is having its effect and Ashford also suffers from a lack of modern, high quality office, commercial and industrial premises.

2.14. Ashford has no clear sector specialisms, and those sectors which are strong and growing tend to be in lower value activities. While economic resources have been focused on improving the town centre, there may still be gaps in the provision of high-quality office and industrial accommodation.

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7 2008, VAT Statistics, BERR
diversity can be an asset, particularly in times of uncertainty, there is a need to strengthen the economic base.

2.15. While investments have been made in the town centre, the drop off in retail expenditure has implications for town centre vitality and there is a need to increase footfall and address those part of the town centre offer that are currently underperforming.

2.16. Labour productivity in Ashford is low compared to the South East average. The economy is skewed towards less high value added activity with a higher proportion of employees in less knowledge-intensive jobs:

- Employment in retail, distribution, transport, and construction is above the regional average;
- Employment in business services, financial services and other services, on the other hand, is below the regional average; and,
- Ashford has retained a large manufacturing base but recent employment growth has been driven by transport & communications, retail, distribution and construction.

2.17. Wages, an indicator of the value of employment activities, are also low in Ashford and growth has been sluggish compared to other areas. The average Ashford resident earns considerably more suggesting people are commuting out to higher paid jobs in London and elsewhere. This wage differential is a reflection of Ashford’s industrial structure, lower levels of productivity and the skills and qualifications of residents. Addressing this challenge will require action on all fronts.

2.18. The skills offer is a key challenge for Ashford. Levels of qualifications are lower than for Kent and the South East and there appears to be a skills gap in some key qualification and occupation areas within the borough’s resident workforce. This is important in terms of local people’s capacity to compete for positions with new employers – but the lack of a higher education and R&D presence in Ashford is a serious drag on the borough’s ability to attract high technology businesses.

2.19. The recession means that Ashford is currently experiencing declining levels of economic activity and productivity, following the trends of the rest of the South East and the UK. Headline indicators show that:

- **House prices are falling**, down 10% from March 2008 to March 2009;\(^9\)
- **Unemployment is rising**, the claimant count increasing by 135% from June 2008 to June 2009\(^11\) albeit from a very low base;
- like elsewhere in the country, **youth unemployment** is becoming a particular challenge, with 32% of JSA claimants falling in the 19-24 age group; and
- **Unemployment to vacancy ratios** are deteriorating, with 5.2 unemployed people to every vacancy in April 2009, compared to a ratio of 1.9 the previous year.\(^12\)

2.20. The recession has had a severe impact on housing starts and completions throughout the UK. It is essential that Ashford is right at the forefront of the market when the upturn emerges,\(^13\) and that partners work innovatively and collaboratively to encourage developers and house builders to maintain momentum through the downturn. Recent evidence suggests that the Ashford housing market is picking up stimulated in part by the roll out of high speed domestic train services. As growth picks up, it will be important to ensure new developments are of the highest possible quality and that they contribute to the Borough’s overall quality of life and environment.

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8 As measured by GVA per head 2006 please see baseline report for further information. Source: ONS; Mid-year Population Estimates/Annual Business Inquiry.
9 The issue of low wages and slow growth is discussed in more detail in the baseline report
10 Land Registry of England and Wales, 2009
11 Claimant Count, DWP
12 Claimant Count; Notified Vacancies
13 Recent anecdotal evidence suggests that there are early signs of recovery in the housing market with the opening of HS1 providing a boost to house prices
2.21. It will also be important to recognise that in the next few years, as we emerge from recession, population growth may occur at a faster pace than employment growth. This is an inevitable consequence of the current economic conditions and the added stimulus of the high speed train on the housing market. However, rather than seeing this as a weakness, it will be important to maximise the benefit of any increase in commuting through capturing local retail expenditure, which can support the vitality of the town centre. In addition, population growth will also directly support employment growth by increasing demand for local services. Previous research has shown that for every 100 people added to the population 23 additional jobs will be created in the local economy.\footnote{GLA Economics, More residents, more jobs?: The relationship between population, employment and accessibility in London, 2005}

2.22. Ashford has an established business and industrial estate portfolio with 16 estates – but it is clear that the overall quality must be improved substantially, particularly in the town centre, if Ashford is to be able to respond to the massive opportunities which will arise over the coming years. This is a critical issue and one which must be addressed if Ashford is to capture the benefits of investments that have already been made and those associated with the arrival of the high speed train. Currently, there is a clear impression amongst stakeholders that good quality office supply in Ashford and the surrounding areas is very restricted, especially for high-quality headquarters-style premises.

2.23. In response to that need, there are already a number of development sites coming forward that will significantly enhance the portfolio and the Ashford offer for office and industrial use. Ashford’s Future points to 350 acres of development sites for employment, including Eureka Business Park, Waterbrook Business Park, Sevington Business Park, Henwood Business Park, Orbital Park, Elwick Place and the new town centre commercial quarter. Major infrastructure investments are planned to enhance access to these sites and to improve connectivity with the motorway network and Ashford International station.

2.24. Attracting additional resources to Ashford over the next decade – a period when we can all expect public and private finance to be relatively constrained - will be vital if the growth targets are to be achieved. However, it is impossible to ignore the significant pressures facing public sector financing and the impact of this on securing resources for further resources for infrastructure investment. Promotion of Ashford’s successful track record in public and private investment will be a major lever in making the case for continued investment – both to government and to developers and businesses. Success breeds success.

**Ashford is still going for growth**

2.25. Ashford remains one of the UK’s most ambitious growth areas. The Core Strategy, which was adopted in July 2008, sets the framework for delivering over the 2001-2021 period, 20,350 new housing units and 17,500 new jobs in the Ashford Growth Area, as well as a further 1,500 housing units across the rest of the Borough. By 2031 Ashford has the capacity to accommodate 31,000 new homes and 28,000 new jobs. Population growth across the borough will itself stimulate employment growth and will support town centre vitality. Growth must be sustainable and of the highest environmental and aesthetic quality.

2.26. The South East’s Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) proposed that by 2026 Ashford was expected to deliver 22,400 net additional dwellings. This equates to an annual average of 1,120 for Ashford – more than double the number expected of other local authorities in the region. Given the impact of the recession, it is likely that the timeframe over which these targets will be met will be longer. However, the housing needs upon which these targets are based remain very real and the overarching objective of growth, together with the opportunities that this creates, is central to Ashford’s future economic prosperity.

2.27. The RSS also recognises that, in order to keep housing and employment in balance, major employment sites will need to be completed and new locations developed, noting that housing provision at Ashford should not run ahead of...
the local economy for a prolonged period. The majority of the growth will be in Ashford town and in proposed urban extensions. The ambitious growth programme will require substantial investment to overcome critical infrastructure constraints and unlock economic potential.

2.28. Ashford’s ambitions for growth were set during a period of sustained economic growth and their achievement will require an even greater degree of endeavour by public and private partners in the light of the current recession. Economic forecasts have recently been produced for SEEDA which take into account the impact of the current recession. Based on past trends in Ashford and not taking account of the growth strategy and specific interventions to accelerate growth in the town, they predict future jobs growth of 7,900 new jobs in Ashford between 2008 and 2024 - a growth of 14%. While this forecast growth is above that predicted for Kent (5%) and the South East (9%) it is significantly below the long-term targets included in the Ashford Core Strategy and RSS.

2.29. While these forecasts are somewhat lower than previous estimates, including those which informed the 2008 Employment Land Review (ELR), it is very important to recognise that these projections of future employment growth in the area by industrial sector are based on past trends in Ashford and its share of regional economic growth. They therefore do not take into account any of Ashford’s stated policy aspirations or the range of proposed activities and interventions. The forecasts strongly reinforce the need for a proactive economic development programme to ensure that Ashford’s future vision is realised.

2.30. The strong message with respect to Ashford’s long-term vision for growth is that the potential for substantial jobs and housing growth still exists despite the recession, as a direct result of the attractive characteristics of Ashford as a place to live and work and of the investment and ground work put in place by Ashford’s agencies and partners. However, there is still some uncertainty about the shape of the national growth curve as we come out of recession and therefore the requirement for an even greater degree of endeavour and commitment by the funding and delivery partners will be essential if Ashford is to drive forward towards its Core Strategy vision and growth targets over the next two decades.

A Vision of the future

2.31. Through the Strategic Economic Framework it will be important to ensure that Ashford remains the ‘smart choice’ for businesses. Capitalising upon the investments that have already been made and the arrival of the new high speed train, offering an opportunity to further grow and develop the Ashford economy as part of a new economic spine for Kent, stretching northwards towards Ebbsfleet and London and maximising the opportunities presented by the high speed train.

2.32. Growth must be sustainable and housing development and employment growth must be of the highest quality. Local partners have also expressed the desire for Ashford to become known as the economic powerhouse of Kent, which is reinforced by Ashford’s Programme of Development and the desire for Ashford to become “a distinctive place in Kent, an anchor point on a new economic spine formed by the high speed rail link...”.

2.33. Recent work to refine and reinforce this vision acknowledged the progress that has been made to build the foundations for future population and economic growth but recognised the need to do more to realise the desired future. Ashford needs to position itself as a first choice location for expanding companies within Kent and the South East, as well as a competitive location for business looking to relocate from London or establish a UK base. In this context, one of Ashford’s defining characteristics is its connectivity, both to London and European markets, but also in terms of its critical location in the East Kent sub-region. Ashford also has an important role to play in the wider vision for Kent being developed by Sir Terry Farrell. In addition, the combination of an urban

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15 See the Ashford Strategic Economic Framework Baseline Report for further discussion
and rural offer within the borough boundaries is a further aspect of connectivity.

2.34. Ashford must build upon this connectivity and maximise the value of its urban and rural offer. Housing and employment growth must be of the highest quality to ensure that we are building a competitive and sustainable community. Partners need to work together to ensure that there is a range of suitable employment sites and premises that are suited to the growth and attraction of modern, knowledge based, industries that offer a range of employment opportunities and higher average wages than is currently the case.

2.35. For all businesses there is a need to stimulate productivity, trading links and competitive advantages by providing opportunities for companies to collaborate and cluster. This needs to be supported by access to a talented and skilled workforce and by mutually reinforcing business – education links.

2.36. While economic diversity is a potential strength, Ashford needs to develop some distinctive economic specialisms. While there are inherent risks in ‘picking winners’ or seeking to grow new economic sectors where there are no underlying assets, there is a need to build upon the recent growth in the business services sector, particularly those that may be classified as ‘knowledge based’ and to make the most of the connections to London and Europe. It is important that future employment growth meets the test of providing quality employment opportunities and higher average wages for residents.

2.37. In recent years there has been an increase in the number of knowledge based micro businesses, particularly in the service sector, and there may be future opportunities to encourage the growth of call centre and back office facilities. This growth needs to be reinforced and needs to be supported by a skilled and qualified labour force, where both businesses and workers are committed to on-going learning and development. Given the anticipated scale of development there may also be opportunities to support the development of the sustainable construction sector.

2.38. Looking to the future, Ashford is well placed to become an economic powerhouse for East Kent. Ashford will be an excellent location for families seeking a home, at a price they can afford, in a well designed truly sustainable community. With this in mind we have identified five strategic priorities and recommended actions, which will guide the Council, Ashford’s Future and partners in their delivery of the jobs and housing growth plans. Progressing these objectives will help ensure Ashford is both the ‘smart choice’ and the long-term choice for businesses and workers.

2.39. With this message in mind we have built on the consultation process and the statistical and qualitative evidence base to draw up a number of strategic priorities, which will guide the Council, Ashford’s Future and partners in supporting economic prosperity.

Strategic priorities

2.40. Five high level strategic priorities have been identified as central to the Framework.

1. Maximising the opportunities for business attraction and growth arising from the introduction of the domestic high speed train service;

2. Securing infrastructure improvements that will stimulate employment creation opportunities;

3. Accelerating plans for the Commercial Quarter and enhancing the town centre;

4. Establishing an effective and responsive dialogue with Ashford’s top employers; and

5. Addressing Ashford’s skills deficit, enhancing the further and higher education offer and promoting work force development.

2.41. In the preceding chapters, we identify a series of thematic actions to support progress towards these priorities.

16 See the Ashford Strategic Economic Framework Baseline Report for further discussion
WORK TOGETHER TO DELIVER ASHFORD’S PLANS FOR JOBS AND HOUSING GROWTH

Achieving Ashford’s ambitious growth programme will require several new housing and employment sites to be developed. New development must be sustainable and growth will depend on the delivery of substantial investment to address infrastructural constraints and unlock economic potential.

3.1. The partners have already delivered an impressive portfolio of investment projects aimed at supporting the growth agenda, including:

- County Square – a significant extension of Ashford’s premier shopping centre bringing the number of shops to 60.
- Stour Centre – opening of state of the art sports and leisure centre in the town centre.
- High Speed Train (domestic services) – trial service in place, Hitachi maintenance depot operational with 100 skilled employees and full launch due for December 2009.
- Eureka Park – construction and letting of the first phase of this 1.4m sq ft flagship business park.
- Junction 10 – completion of a £7m improvement in 2007, opening up development sites in the east of the town.
- The identification of new housing and employment sites

3.2. However, despite this track record of successful delivery, achieving the vision of delivering the growth agenda over the next two decades will require partners to maintain and, in some cases, accelerate their momentum in planning, assembling sites and bringing infrastructure and investment projects forward. The programme is complex and there are key interrelationships and dependencies between schemes as well as just a large volume of schemes.

The projects that have already been identified as essential for unlocking the growth potential in Ashford include:

- Commercial Quarter – A 590,000 sq ft office development with retail and residential components adjacent to Ashford International station.
- Elwick Place – A planned 6.6 acre mixed use town centre development.
- Victoria Way – A new all purpose traffic route between Beaver Road and Brookfield Road,
aimed at local regeneration and enabling new development to come forward to the south of the town centre.

- Junction 9 – Increased capacity at existing junction to facilitate further delivery of Eureka Park, Barracks and other sites to the north of the town.
- Junction 10a – This new junction to the South East of J10 is essential for the delivery of the Sevington industrial area and Cheeseman's Green urban extension. It will be led by the Highways Agency but contributions are expected from private sector developers.
- Land assembly and masterplanning for outstanding housing and employment sites, including Cheeseman’s Green, Waterbrook and Chilmington Green.
- Improved Telecommunications Infrastructure – Support and encourage the implementation of super fast broadband telecommunications in all new developments to support the future proofing of development, and the take up of housing and employment space.

3.4. Given the complexity of the development process at this scale and the particular challenges that exist in the current commercial and residential property markets - and given the impact that slippage could have on the capacity of Ashford’s public sector partners and private sector investors to drive forward with their ambitious delivery plans – it is essential that everything possible is done to make sure that Ashford is prepared so that all the major pipeline projects proceed as planned.

3.5. The partners have recognised the need to build the capacity of the delivery bodies to ensure that there is an enhanced and dedicated resource of expertise, capacity and focus. The creation of the Strategic Sites Team is an innovative idea and a sign of commitment from the key partners. The Programme of Development provided for the establishment of the team, comprising a combination of Ashford Borough Council and Kent County Council senior staff from a range of disciplines, supplemented where appropriate by staff hot-desking from other organisations such as the Highways Agency and Environment Agency.

3.6. There are four important priorities for partners to take forward urgently if Ashford is to achieve its vision for employment and housing growth over the next twenty years:
- Accelerate housing starts;
- Transform capacity for project delivery;
- Complete site assembly and masterplanning; and
- Progress key infrastructure projects.

Accelerate housing starts

3.7. The housing targets for Ashford are ambitious in any circumstances but the onset of the recession has made the delivery programme all the more challenging. With a requirement to deliver over 1,000 homes a year for the next two decades it will be essential to accelerate starts from the current levels. In the current market this will undoubtedly be a challenge but the benefits of further housing growth have the potential to support local job creation and to enhance town centre vitality.
3.8. The range of mechanisms explored should not be constrained and should be seen in the context of the potential to achieve massive positive outcomes in terms of units started and completed and in the contribution to the growth agenda. Current and future actions include:

- **Promoting Ashford’s connectivity to London** – the arrival of the domestic high speed train is already providing a boost to Ashford’s housing market. This should be capitalised upon and positively promoted as a sign of a buoyant market where returns on investment will be provided.

- **Maintaining a close dialogue with developers and house builders** – creating confidence and trust between the public and private sector has an important role to play in accelerating housing delivery. Ashford’s Future Company will continue to host regular developer breakfasts and discussions as a means of maintaining an active and ongoing dialogue with developers.

- **Work with HCA to identify funding and delivery options** – The Council and Ashford’s Future will continue to work with the HCA to explore how the Agency can use its funding and flexibilities to accelerate housing starts in a way that will support the growth agenda in Ashford. Initial progress has already been made via the ‘kick start’ scheme and it will be important to look for further opportunities to minimise the perception of risk that is felt by developers and house builders in the recession.

3.10. The new team will bring a co-ordinated approach to working with developers and have established a series of working protocols to facilitate joint working. The team represents a ‘promise’ to developers to work in a more efficient and effective manner to facilitate development on Ashford’s key sites. At the same time much more is asked of the private sector to ensure that they are bringing forward schemes of the highest possible quality. In design terms, there is also a need for greater distinctiveness and to attract new and iconic architects to transform Ashford’s image and reputation.

3.11. Key actions are to:

- **Embed new Strategic Sites Team** – Now that the Strategic Sites Team is operational there is an ongoing need to review the protocols and procedures that have been adopted and to ensure that it is able to add real value to the planning and development of Ashford’s key sites. The partners need to create the conditions and provide the right resources to allow the new team to meet its objectives and accelerate the delivery of the programme with the maximum degree of efficiency and quality. The protocols between the partners will be key, and the governance and decision making must be supportive and timely.

- **Attracting high quality architecture and design** – Given the scale of new development planned within the Borough there is an opportunity to create a new Ashford vernacular. This will require the attraction of new and iconic architects and designers. The arrival of the new high speed train and the vision for growth should be used as a driver for establishing a dialogue with the design sector.

Transform capacity for project delivery and drive up quality of development

3.9. With the scale of development planned for Ashford it is important that the public and private sectors work together to deliver high quality sustainable developments. Partners have established the new Strategic Sites Team, involving senior specialists from the key organisations and managed by Ashford Borough Council. This is an innovative step to create a dedicated and focused multi-disciplinary team with the resources to drive through a programme that can involve up to 15 live projects at any time.
Complete site assembly and masterplanning

3.12. The planning process is complex and time consuming and requires close collaboration between partners and between the planners, land owners and subsequent infrastructure providers.

3.13. The key actions include:

- Adopt the Town Centre Action Plan – The availability of an adopted Town Centre Action Plan will provide considerable comfort and guidance for potential investors and developers. This is vital for the development of key schemes such as Commercial Quarter and Elwick Place as well as the whole range of issues around town centre vitality and the use or reuse of existing office blocks. This process should be concluded with urgency.

- Ensuring that key public sector assets support development – The development of Commercial Quarter is a key opportunity for Ashford. A number of key assets within the Commercial Quarter, specifically International House, are in SEEDA’s ownership. SEEDA is currently reviewing how these assets will be controlled and managed in the future, with consideration being given to the establishment of a regional asset backed vehicle. Whatever the outcomes of the review it will be essential that the assets work to support the delivery of the Commercial Quarter.

Progress key infrastructure projects

3.14. The key projects which need to be developed and delivered in the next few years are set out above and cover road schemes, employment and mixed use developments, residential sites and improvements to utilities including power supply and super-fast broadband access and residential sites. The complexity of the Ashford growth programme is such that one scheme tends to have real consequences for others which depend on it, so projects such as the outstanding M20 junction improvements not only provide necessary capacity in their own right but are essential to unlock new employment and residential sites throughout Ashford.

3.15. The key action that is required is to:

- Secure funding for M20 junctions and other infrastructure – Partners need to continue exploring the opportunities for funding the road and other infrastructure schemes. Junction 10a is being led by the Highways Agency and approvals are awaited for a funding package between the Agency and HCA to cover the estimated £76m cost. Planning permission has been granted for the Victoria Way scheme which will be delivered in 2 phases. Ashford’s Future is building Victoria Way with funding from the HCA/DfT Community Infrastructure Fund, and has just received approval to Regional Infrastructure Funding to improve Junction 9 of the M20. Both schemes will be complete in 2011.

- Facilitate the delivery of Super-fast Broadband infrastructure to all new developments – Ashford’s Broadband Strategy and the incorporation of requirements in the Ashford Core Strategy for developments to “include ducting space to enable the provision of fibre optic cabling”, and the development of a Broadband and Telecommunications Supplementary Planning Document, will provide a strong policy context to deliver super-fast Broadband into new sites. While there are also issues relating to rural broadband coverage, it is especially important in the main employment sites to future proof developments from increasing requirements from businesses. Current activity supported through funding from SEEDA is facilitating negotiations between telecommunications companies and developers to implement fibre optic cabling into key new development sites. This activity will enhance the attractiveness of these employment sites especially in attracting knowledge intensive business sectors.
ENHANCE THE SUPPLY OF HIGH QUALITY OFFICE AND EMPLOYMENT SPACE

There is agreement amongst stakeholders that Ashford currently lacks a supply of good quality and modern office space, particularly in the town centre, and that the inward investment offer urgently requires appropriate product on the ground. The delivery of new office space and employment will require a new approach to sharing risk across the public and private sectors.

4.1. The Ashford Office Market Report\(^\text{17}\) found that 86% of available office units were second hand, with another 12% having been refurbished, and much of the office stock is older and in need of updating. The Report indicated that one reason for the lack of office development has been the perception that Ashford was an industrial area, and less attractive to perspective locators than nearby locations such as Tunbridge Wells and Canterbury.\(^\text{18}\) However, given Ashford’s outstanding connectivity, both by road and rail, there is a real opportunity for Ashford to become part of a new economic spine for Kent and to build upon the important role that the borough already plays in providing employment for Kent residents.

4.2. At present, there is a degree of polarisation since Ashford has developed a strong and successful offer around the motorway junctions whilst the town centre lags behind. This is a critical issue given the town centre’s developing ‘gateway’ function and the need for sustainability and public transport accessibility. The creation of new employment opportunities will also be important in ensuring that it is possible to balance in and out commuting across the borough. While there is likely to be a rise in out commuting, stimulated by the high speed train, Ashford must continue to provide jobs for surrounding districts if net commuting is to remain in balance.

4.3. In response to that need, the Council and Ashford’s Future already have a number of attractive development sites coming forward that, once developed, will significantly enhance the portfolio and the Ashford offer for both office and industrial use. Ashford’s Future points to 350 acres of development sites for employment, including Eureka Business Park, Waterbrook Business Park, Sevington Business Park, Henwood Business Park, Orbital Park, Elwick Place and the new town centre commercial quarter. Major infrastructure investments are planned to enhance access to these sites and to improve connectivity with the motorway network and Ashford International station.

4.4. As proposals for the town centre move forward, there will be a need for a positive approach to managing the relocation of existing business which would be affected by the developments. In line with the Core Strategy, there will be a need for a specific DPD/SPD to facilitate the relocation of existing firms to minimise the risk of businesses and jobs being lost from the Borough.

4.5. Looking towards the motorway junctions, Eureka Park has already proved successful – particularly

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\(^{17}\) Ashford Office Market Report (Knight Frank Research, 2008)

\(^{18}\) Ashford Employment Land Review (Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners, 2008)
in attracting companies from other parts of Kent and the South East – and planning permission has been granted for a further 60,000 sq ft. The entire development is anticipated to extend to over 1m sq ft which could accommodate well in excess of 5,000 high value added jobs in due course. While the further development of Eureka Park is likely to attract further relocations, speculative development is currently unlikely and there is also the challenge of securing electricity supply across the site.

4.6. The key development site in the town centre is the proposed Commercial Quarter project adjacent to Ashford International station. Here there is potential to create a new gateway to the borough and to provide attractive employment space in the environs of the station, to take advantage of the new high speed service, before the next round of rail franchises in 2014. The refurbishment and occupation of International House has already shown that there is effective demand for employment space in this location and the proposed enhancements to the exterior of the property will enhance the visual attractiveness of the property. This together with the improvements to Ashford International Station forecourt will also create a better first impression for potential residents, investors or employers.

4.7. While these initiatives are to be welcomed, there is also a need to do more to drive the Commercial Quarter forward. In the current financial climate and recognising the unlikelihood of purely speculative development, bringing forward the Commercial Quarter will require a fundamentally new approach to sharing risk between the public and private sectors. While this may require the public sector to take on board more of the development risk than has previously been the case, without such an approach there is an inherent danger that the expansion of Ashford’s economy will not keep pace with planned housing growth, at least in the short term. It will also be important that the existing public sector assets, such as International House, continue to work for Ashford as they will play an important role in revenue generation and securitisation of potential borrowing.

4.8. Stakeholders suggested three main barriers to new investment in office and employment space in Ashford in the current climate – developers’ inability to raise finance; greatly reduced demand; and the fact that town centre rents are too low to attract speculative development (below their 1990 level). These are all largely governed by the current recession and might be expected to become less adverse over the next year or two.

4.9. However, Locate in Kent, SEEDA, agents and developers all agree that the single most important factor in turning initial interest and enquiries into successful inward investment decisions is the availability of office and employment premises for potential occupiers to view and access. They all called for the provision of speculative build in the town centre and out-of-town business park locations if Ashford is to make real progress in providing a quality offer.

4.10. Key priorities for stakeholders are therefore to:
- Prioritise the town centre and accelerate plans for the Commercial Quarter; and
- Unlock the completion of key employment sites.

Prioritise the town centre – accelerate Commercial Quarter plans

4.11. The Commercial Quarter, a 590,000 sq ft business district planned to take advantage of the high speed rail links to London and Europe, is the flagship scheme for Ashford town centre. Ashford’s Future and SEEDA unveiled the Commercial Quarter plans in July 2009. Covering a 16 acre site the scheme involves 590,000 sq ft of offices next to Ashford International station, plus street-level retail and 150 flats. SEEDA has recently commissioned Jones Lang LaSalle to work on proposals for the Commercial Quarter, including looking at lessons from other urban centres that are a similar distance from London.

4.12. The Commercial Quarter is vital to unlocking the development of the town centre and creating the ambitious Gateway to Ashford. The provision of
quality office accommodation in the Commercial Quarter, linked to a proactive inward investment campaign, will be essential to helping ensure that economic growth and housing growth go hand in hand. Progressing the Commercial Quarter will also send the right signals to the market regarding the opportunities for further development in the wider town centre – for refurbishment or replacement of existing office blocks and continuing the enhancement of the town centre retail offer in the wake of the recent County Square extension.

4.13. There is also a more general need to revitalise secondary office stock in the wider town centre. Ashford currently has an oversupply of poor quality and underutilised secondary office stock across the town centre. This sends negative signals to the market and holds back speculative development. At the same time where refurbishment has occurred, such as in the case of International House, there have been few difficulties in securing occupiers. However, given restrictions of public sector budgets, refurbishment will have to be left to the market.

4.14. In addition, the development of a major employment scheme in the immediate area around Ashford International station will have a direct impact on passenger numbers using the high speed train and this will positively influence the business cases being put forward for the next rail franchise period.

4.15. The key actions therefore are to:

- **Accelerate plans for the Commercial Quarter project** – Masterplanning is currently underway and is expected to be completed in early 2010 and then Ashford’s Future and SEEDA will begin discussions with potential development partners. In addition, there is a need to clarify the future arrangements for the management and use of SEEDA’s existing assets within the town and for there to be a commitment to ensure that these assets remain in the control of the public sector and are effectively utilised to deliver the vision for Ashford’s Future.

- **Finalising proposals for Elwick Place** – there is a need to successfully complete the masterplan for Elwick Place and to progress the planning application and development of the scheme, which will provide important office, retail and leisure space.

Unlock the completion of key employment sites

4.16. Beyond the town centre, employment sites such as Eureka Park play an equally vital role in the creation of business park employment space in Ashford, if not Kent, with a potential to take thousands of jobs – but there are real risks and barriers to early completion. Located north
of Junction 9, the site has been successful in attracting a number of new companies to the town. In particular, the high quality, modern space has proved extremely attractive to companies that might otherwise have relocated outside of Kent. With outline planning permission extending to over 1m sq ft it constitutes a massive component of the Ashford employment space offer in the coming years.

4.17. The masterplan for Eureka Park allows for the flexible development of an additional 1.1m sq ft extending over 96 acres. It will provide offices, R&D and light industrial accommodation. The developers believe that finance and demand are the immediate barriers to further development but have made it clear that if an appropriate funding package can be put in place then infrastructure works, including securing appropriate power supply, could start before the end of 2009 on a 60,000 sq ft scheme.

4.18. In addition, action is also required to progress the development of a number of other key employment sites across the Borough. While significant progress has been made with the proposals for Elwick Place, with Stanhope PLC being selected as the preferred developers there is an ongoing need to secure occupiers to demonstrate the commercial viability of proposed developments.

4.19. Those actions that are recommended to unlock the completion of Eureka Park and other key employment sites are as follows:

- **Address issues relating to power supply at Eureka** – The requirement for a £5m infrastructure scheme to secure power supply to the site is a barrier to development in the near future. The Council and Ashford’s Future are exploring potential funding options including TIF and this should be concluded with some urgency.

- **Proactive targeting of future investors** – Take up has been successful at Northdown and there is only limited space available at Herald. However, developers will not provide further accommodation without the certainty of occupiers. The Council, Ashford’s Future, Locate in Kent and SEEDA should make it an urgent priority to agree a proactive approach to targeting further businesses, as part of a more explicit inward investment strategy, which might benefit from relocation to Ashford. While the ideal situation would be to secure occupiers on a pre-let basis there may be a need to explore the extent to which the public sector could provider rental guarantees or other incentives.

- **Explore innovative funding to remove barriers to speculative building** – The Council, Ashford’s Future, SEEDA and HCA should all explore possible funding models to de-risk the delivery of speculative build at Eureka Park and elsewhere. While public and private sector finance is likely to remain constrained for some time, partners have already sought to take advantage of new models such as Tax Increment Financing (TIF) and it will be important to look at other potential models of value capture financing and to explore opportunities for borrowing against assets and raising capital through bond issues to fund up front infrastructure costs.
In the face of growing international competition, the short and long term future of businesses will depend on their ability to raise productivity – to produce goods and services more efficiently and to a higher quality than elsewhere.

5.1. Ashford’s economy has expanded rapidly over the last decade delivering 9,000 new jobs and 1,500 new companies. Business formations rates are considerably higher than the regional and national figures. In 2007 the company registration rate stood at 56 per 10,000 resident adults compared to just 42-48 in Kent, the South East and Britain. However, Ashford’s rate of business closure is also above average - a figure of 41 per 10,000 in contrast to just 30-34 in comparator areas. High business churn (high formation and closure rates together) are often seen as an indicator of a competitive and entrepreneurial economy but it also suggests that improved and focused business support might help reduce closures to a regional or national average.

5.2. Labour productivity, as measure by GVA per head, in Ashford is low. In 2006 GVA per head stood at £17,370 below the South East average of £20,152. The economy is skewed towards less knowledge intensive, lower value added, economic activity. This is reflected in the employment structure of the borough and in local wage levels. Employment in retail, distribution, transport, and construction is above the regional average. Employment in business services, financial services, and other services is below the regional average. Local wages are low in Ashford workers in the borough earn on average £416 per week compared to an average of £476 per week in Kent, and £500 per week in the South East.

5.3. Reflecting the predominately rural nature of the Borough, comprising two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and a number of villages including Tenterden, Charing and Wye, 49% of Ashford’s businesses and 26% of jobs.19 While, due to definitional issues, these figures will include jobs and businesses at the Eureka business park, the number of jobs in rural Ashford increased by 9% between 2003 and 2007, leading to an additional 1,000 rural jobs. Some 92% of rural businesses employ less than 10 people – compared to just 82% in urban areas. Definitional issues aside, Ashford’s rural economy is of real important to the borough, both in terms of economic activity and identity, and its’ continued growth and development should be supported.

5.4. Self employment and working from home are also important in Ashford’s rural areas – as they are nationally. While precise figures are not available, UK-wide research showed that one in nine people in rural areas work mainly from home and that the trend is rising, driven by technology, high property costs and a resistance to commuting. Stakeholder evidence suggests that home working has increased during the recession with an upturn in self-employment. There is an opportunity to build upon this trend and there is a need to ensure that support for rural businesses and home workers is appropriate to their needs.

5.5. More generally, recognising the current economic climate, there is a need to consider how best to support companies through the recession. The UK moved into a deep recession in 2008 and evidence suggests recovery may be hesitant and prolonged, particularly with respect to employment growth. During these challenging economic times it is important to ensure that good local businesses are not lost because of the short term impacts of the recession. This is not about the public sector shoring up failing companies, or about picking winners but instead making sure that good local companies and jobs are not lost from the borough unnecessarily.

5.6. Clearly, partners are already responding to this challenge but more could be done. The Government’s Solutions for Business programme, which encompasses the Business Link service acts as the primary portal to Government support for business including guidance on rate relief and faster payments.

5.7. The ‘Backing Kent Business’ is a county-wide KCC-led campaign setting out a 10-point...
package of support for local businesses. This includes a number of local procurement initiatives, establishing a property fund to accelerate development, marketing and promotion campaigns and a commitment to bring forward the County’s £850m capital programme over two years.

5.8. Locally, Ashford Borough Council is already providing practical help to businesses in terms of rate relief and deferral; also, in collaboration with KCC, there are opportunities to defer development contributions. In addition, the Council ensures that all procurement opportunities are accessible via the South East Business Portal, which provides information about existing contracts and forthcoming tendering opportunities across the 74 councils and 9 fire and rescue services of the South East region.

5.9. In terms of supporting business growth and competitiveness the key priorities for stakeholders are therefore to:
- Strengthen Ashford’s business base;
- Support the development of Ashford’s rural economy; and
- Continue to support local companies through the recession.

Strengthening Ashford’s business base

5.10. Ashford has been very successful in expanding its business base but business closure rates remain high and survival rates have shown little improvement. In addition, there is a need to enhance the competitiveness and productivity of existing and new businesses through focused efforts to stimulate enterprise and innovation and to improve management and leadership. Progress in these areas will have a positive impact on increasing GVA and raising wage levels.

5.11. There is an entrepreneurial culture with high rates of business formations and high levels of self-employment. However, business closure rates are also above average and the economy underperforms on measures of labour productivity; it is also skewed towards lower value added, less knowledge intensive sectors. Support for businesses in Ashford needs to focus on strengthening the business base through support for enterprise and innovation.

5.12. A key part of the business support infrastructure is the Government’s Business Link service. From 1st April 2010 the provision of the regional Business Link service in the South East is contracted to SERCO. Business Support Kent will co-exist and continue to provide other regional and sub-regional SEEDA and EU funded services including 2012, European Enterprise Network and a number of sustainability and environmental technology programmes. Business Support Kent have also been awarded the accountable body contract for the Innovation and Growth Team (IGT) in Kent and Medway from October 2009.

5.13. The new Innovation and Growth Team (IGT) will target the 250 businesses in Kent and Medway with the greatest growth potential, providing intensive assistance to support innovation and growth. The IGT service will bring together a number of existing regional support products including Enterprise Hubs, the Innovation Advisory Service and Investment Readiness support. Together all of these products will all be delivered through the IGT under the Solutions for Business brand.

5.14. These activities will be essential for raising productivity and should bring benefits to those companies in Ashford that are eligible for support. A key issue for partners is to ensure that the maximum number of companies across Ashford qualify for support. In this respect, the criteria which define whether a company is considered to have ‘high growth’ potential will be critical. An established and effective dialogue with local employers is a key mechanism for support economic growth. Effective engagement can increase trust and build social capital. It also ensures area-specific business needs are understood and more likely to be addressed, and helps build ownership of priorities and actions.

5.15. A key element of all of these activities will be the establishment of an effective dialogue with employers. Partners in Ashford are already building closer relationships with key employers.
through initiatives such as the developers breakfasts, the work of the local Chamber and the emerging Employer Liaison Service and Skills Contact Centre. In engaging with local businesses through these emerging structures there is a need to develop a strategic approach to account management, particularly with the Borough’s top businesses to ensure that their needs are met in a co-ordinated fashion. The following action is therefore recommended.

5.16. In order to strengthen the business base the following actions are recommended:

- **Develop a strategic account management system with Ashford’s top businesses** – Ashford’s Future, the Council and the Chamber of Commerce should agree an approach to strategic account management. This should include identifying the Borough’s top employers and establish a shared approach to CRM across all business engagement activities. Once a system and protocols have been agreed partners should agree how best to co-ordinate activities so as to demonstrate how the strategic approach offers them real business benefits. The purpose of the system should be to better understand the current and future support needs of the Borough’s key employers and to facilitate a co-ordinated response to business needs.

- **Ensure that the Business Link offer is responsive to Ashford’s needs** – Partners have agreed to work to pull the business support offer together during 2009/10 to ensure the new Business Link provider has access to a tailored and effective model which serves Ashford’s unique growth requirements and opportunities. In particular, there is a need to support existing companies to enhance work place productivity and to capitalise upon the new market opportunities related to the opening of the high speed train service and the forecast growth in population. As the new Business Link service is rolled out partners will wish to ensure it is fully promoted to urban and rural businesses across the borough and that consideration is given to how gaps in delivery can be addressed.

- **Develop an enterprise and innovation initiative** – Research carried out for Ashford’s Future has identified the three key dimensions of business support which successfully embed enterprise and innovation: Space, Support and Capacity building. The partners should develop a coordinated initiative which addresses each of these, including flexible incubator space with easy in/easy out contracts, excellent ICT, dedicated business support and mentoring, networking and connections with learning institutions. The creation of dedicated enterprise space will be challenging for partners and partners such as SEEDA and HCA will need to share the risk. The Basepoint model offers an option for taking forward in Ashford, potentially at Eureka Park.

**Support the development of Ashford’s rural economy**

5.17. The rural economy in Ashford is significant and accounts for half of all businesses in the borough but rural businesses have particular support needs.

5.18. It is essential that the business infrastructure and support services recognise the particular needs of rural businesses and the challenges they face – related to their relative remoteness, their predominantly small size, their focus on certain sectors (eg. food and drink, farm diversification, tourism, technology) and the importance of self-employment and home working. There is also a need to take account of the particular needs of small business and home-based businesses – often high technology, knowledge economy firms. Of particular importance here is the provision and take up of high-speed broadband services throughout the rural area.

5.19. Rural areas are associated in people’s minds with sustainability and positive environmental practices. There are particular opportunities to build on this and enhance the local and national reputation of Ashford’s rural areas as a green exemplar.
5.20. Recommended actions to support the rural economy are:

- **Ashford Borough Council should collaborate with the County Council and SEEDA** to draw up a pilot business development model which meets the requirements above, exploring the possibility of LEADER funding. Kent County Council identified three key business support requirements:
  - Land based – with a focus on diversification opportunities and particularly issues related to planning requirements for barn conversions, self catering accommodation and other proposals.
  - Rural retail – it was felt that advisers must be able to visit rural shops to understand their challenges and potential.
  - Home-based start-ups – delivering the ‘Under the Radar’ recommendations, such as reliable broadband and possible community-based business space.

5.21. The recession is clearly impacting on local businesses and residents, but it may also offer some particular opportunities for the future. The recession is creating a number of different challenges for business. Some are directly affected by the lack of available credit, while others are affected indirectly by the knock-on implications of a decline in national output and expenditure. Discussions with stakeholders suggest that one of the biggest barriers locally is access to finance, despite the banks’ stated commitments. Small businesses need support with trading through recession.

5.22. The following actions are recommended to support local companies through the recession:

- **Ensure Backing Kent Business delivers for Ashford** – The Council and partners should work with KCC to ensure that all opportunities to deliver against the 10-point campaign for the benefit of Ashford businesses are explored. Where benefits are identified the partners should commit to supporting the initiatives locally, for example through procurement and signposting.

- **Signpost companies to finance, skills or procurement support** – The Council and partners should urgently develop a joint signposting offer for local companies which helps them through the complex web of support and information surrounding these key issues.

- **Promote local procurement opportunities** – This is a beneficial initiative in any circumstances but much more pertinent in the recession. Ashford’s public agencies and developers will continue to create massive opportunities in construction in the coming years and all investors should be striving to ensure local companies - large companies, SMEs and micro-businesses – are made aware of sub-contracting opportunities and supported through the challenging tendering processes. This should build upon the practice of ensuring all Council opportunities are advertised on the South East Business Portal and the current review of procurement activity being undertaken by the Council should explore what else can be done.
BUILD A COMPETITIVE WORKFORCE FOR THE FUTURE

A highly qualified workforce is a pre-requisite for local areas to compete in the knowledge driven economy. Higher skilled workers are more productive and provide the ideas which in turn lead to innovation. Skills are central to increasing employment, helping people stay in work and giving them the opportunities to get on in work.

6.1. Ashford currently underperforms with regards to skills. There is a clear skills deficient within the resident population and businesses have reported difficulties in finding the skills they require in the local workforce. The issue of skills is a critical component of economic growth and development and raising skills levels, as well as ensuring that skills are applied within existing and future businesses, will be essential to achieving the long term vision for the borough. Skills are widely recognised as a key driver of productivity and competitiveness. HM Treasury’s analysis of the drivers of shows that workforce skill levels have a positive impact on labour productivity. Skilled workers find it easier to access and retain employment and are also more productive in employment.

6.2. The Leitch Review, published in 2006, highlighted that the UK is ‘running to stand still’ in terms of skills provision. Although there have been significant improvements in participation and attainment, particularly up to Level 2, global labour markets are evolving at an even faster rate.20

6.3. The Review makes the case for investment in skills to ensure it has a world-leading skills base or risk losing out on high value-added industries and new technologies to emerging global economies. Among the recommendations to deliver a step change in the UK’s skills base were: a focus on economically valuable skills which provide attractive returns for individuals, employers and society and which deliver mobility in the labour market; and a demand-led skills system to meet both the needs of individuals and employers.

6.4. These issues are as relevant in Ashford as they are anywhere else and partners have already recognised the importance of addressing skills challenges in facilitating the future growth of the Borough’s economy. Ashford’s Future, the Learning and Skills Council and Kent County Council commissioned Step Ahead Research to prepare a Skills Strategy for the Borough. The Ashford’s Skills Strategy was published in March 2009, following an extensive programme of research, stakeholder and business engagement.

6.5. The Strategy, which is being driven forward for the Ashford’s Future Partnership, identifies six Strategic Priorities:
1. Addressing Current and Future Skills Needs
2. Engaging Employers
3. Developing the Learning Campus as the focus on an Integrated Local Learning and Skills System
4. Raising Standards, Achievement and Aspiration
5. Integrating Skills with Economic Development and Inward Investment Activities
6. Delivering the Strategy

6.6. Against each of these priorities the strategy details a number of key actions, many of which are highly relevant to the Economic Framework. The Skills Strategy and the Economic Framework are both informed by the fact that while Ashford has a tight labour market, and in recent years employment levels have remained high, the structure of the local economy offers lower wages and less well-skilled jobs than those typical of the South East. There is a particular deficit of higher levels skills among the resident working age population. The result is reflected in low work place earnings with the differential in wages between Ashford and the rest of the South East worsening in recent years.

6.7. Ashford has a substantial skills deficit which extends from the performance of young people at GCSE level to fewer higher level qualifications.
in its working age population. GCSE results of local pupils are below average with just 41% of pupils achieving 5 or more grades A-C at the end of Key Stage 4 - against 49% regionally and 46% nationally.\textsuperscript{21} The gap with the regional average is widest amongst female pupils.

6.8. The latest adult qualification figures suggest that Ashford lags behind the South East in terms of residents qualified to degree standard with only 24% of residents qualified at Level 4+ compared with 32% in the South East.\textsuperscript{22} On the other hand Ashford has a higher concentration of residents with intermediate and lower level qualifications than Kent, the South East and Britain. While Ashford has fewer people with no qualifications at all, there is a high concentration of people in the 50+ group who have no qualifications (26%, compared with 16% for the Region).\textsuperscript{23}

6.9. As highlighted in the Skills Strategy, addressing Ashford’s skills deficits is a key area of concern. Evidence from the Skills Strategy showed that businesses have reported difficulties in attracting people with higher level technical skills and finding people with the right soft skills to recruit to entry level jobs.

6.10. A number of interviews with Ashford-based businesses were carried out to inform the Skills Strategy. Overall, the businesses interviewed had a mixed view of the local skills base. Recruitment of suitably skilled staff to businesses providing intermediate level products and services did not seem to be a major issue, whilst some smaller local businesses producing higher value added goods and services also reported few difficulties finding the right staff to train. However, a number of skills challenges were highlighted:

- Recruiting people with good literacy and numeracy skills to entry level positions was reported by many employers to be difficult;
- Some larger companies reported that they recruited staff from outside the borough because they could not find people with the right skills locally; and
- Even where there are high level jobs available in the town, it is not always easy for businesses to find local staff with the right skills.

6.11. The Ashford Skills Strategy also found that part of the problem in attracting higher value added businesses is that Ashford is seen as a low wage, high employment area where people can get by without high levels of skills and that workers ‘lack a learning culture and lack ambition’. There is a urgent need to tackle this issue and to create a learning culture, which reflects the new economic reality and maximises individual and business competitiveness. The key recommendations of the Skills Strategy included:

- engaging employers;
- raising standards, achievement and aspirations; and
- integrating skills with economic development and inward investment.

6.12. Trend based forecasts suggest that there is likely to be an increasing demand for people with higher level skills in Ashford in the future and a shrinking pool of lower skilled job opportunities.

6.13. Expansion demand forecasts for 2008-14 contained within the Skills Strategy suggest that overall growth is forecast to be concentrated in higher level roles across a wide range of sectors (particularly retail and the public sector) while lower level jobs are forecast to decline across most sectors. There is also forecast to be job growth in intermediate level, customer facing occupations, such as sales and customer service and personal service roles.

6.14. Replacement demand - created as workers leave their employers - accounts for most labour demand in the labour market. Replacement demand suggests that around 5,000 new recruits will be needed each year, most notably in retail, business services, the public sector and other services, to replace workers retiring from the labour market.

\textsuperscript{21} GCSE and equivalent results, 2006/07, Department for Children, Schools and Families
\textsuperscript{22} Annual Population Survey January 2008 to December 2008
\textsuperscript{23} Ashford Skills Strategy, Step Ahead Research, March 2009
6.15. Overall the expansion and replacement demand forecasts for 2008-14 contained within the Skills Strategy suggest that there is likely to be an increasing demand for people with higher level (Level 3 and 4) skills in Ashford in the future and a shrinking pool of lower skilled job opportunities. In addition it is noted that if Ashford’s growth aims are realised and if it is successful in attracting higher level jobs in the business and financial services sector, this trend is likely to become even sharper.

6.16. There is also evidence that Ashford has a limited further education offer, a weak higher education presence, and a lack of engagement of businesses in the learning and skills agenda. The Skills Strategy found that “local residents and businesses have been poorly served in recent years by the local further education offer and there is a relatively weak higher education presence”. The lack of training opportunities in the borough means that the more aspirant learners often leave to learn. This is evidenced by the deficit in the proportion of the population between the ages of 20 and 30 – just one in ten of Ashford’s population compared to 14% in GB.24

6.17. Anecdotal evidence suggests that not only do more aspirant learners often leave the area to learn, but that considerable numbers of higher skilled workers commute out of Ashford to neighbouring districts and to London to find employment. This is demonstrated by wages of local residents being much higher than those of local workers, and by the occupational profile of out-commuters from Ashford. The Census suggests that Ashford relies on in-commuting to fill the higher level occupations which are available in the area, perhaps due to a lack of skilled labour. This issue is highlighted in the Ashford Skills Strategy which suggests that even when high level jobs are available it is not always easy to find local staff with the right skills.

6.18. The Strategy also noted that there appears to be limited business engagement with the learning and skills agenda and that business appear to be unaware of what the learning offer is and that learning providers find it difficult to establish what business demands actually are.

6.19. In addition, evidence from the consultation process points to the need to increase the range of progression opportunities, with a particular emphasis on developing higher education opportunities for Ashford learners. Stakeholders also stressed the need to engage more effectively with young people to develop aspirations and introduce them effectively to the world of work.

6.20. Therefore, based on the challenges set out above, the focus of the Skills Strategy and the stakeholder discussions, we suggest three key priorities for building a competitive workforce for the future:

- Addressing the skills deficit;
- Creating a learning culture; and
- Engaging Employers.

Addressing Ashford’s skills deficit

6.21. The Skills Strategy found that “local residents and businesses have been poorly served in recent years by the local further education offer and there is a relatively weak higher education presence”. The lack of training opportunities in the borough means that the more aspirant learners often leave to learn. This is evidenced by the deficit in the proportion of the population between the ages of 20 and 30 – just one in ten of Ashford’s population compared to 14% in GB.25 This has been recognised as a priority by partners and a draft business case for a skills contact centre in Ashford has been produced. The recently proposed merger of South Kent College and West Kent College could create real opportunities to address the past weaknesses in the FE offer.

6.22. In terms of addressing the skills deficit, the following actions are recommended:

- **Maximise the impact of the proposed merged college** – The new college should work with partners to develop its physical

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24 2007 Mid-year Population Estimates, ONS
25 2007 Mid-year Population Estimates, ONS
facilities and curriculum to ensure it enhances its provision, learning pathways and outcomes. It should become the focus of an integrated learning and skills system, reaching out to communities as well as further extending its reach to higher education. As identified in the Skills Strategy, the college must engage with employers to respond to three different aspects of demand:

- Responding to the changing demands of students;
- Responding to the skills and learning needs of existing businesses; and
- Responding to the likely needs of Ashford’s future economy.

**Develop an effective higher education presence** – The College and local partners should build relationships to greatly enhance the provision of HE in the borough through Foundation and full degrees in subjects relevant to the future needs of the Ashford economy, to help retain local young people and attract students from outside the area entirely. Employers believe that it is essential to develop more challenging and innovative provision locally at higher levels.

**Establishing a liaison and contact service to stimulate better connections between the business community and supporting agencies** – Ashford’s Future will lead a partnership approach and liaison service, and work with local agencies to increase the range and quality of locally available skills provision so that more young people, adults, employers and employees can gain easy and local access to the vocational and higher education they require. This liaison and contact service will work with employers providing in the first instance a virtual service. As our development sites begin construction the service will establish a physical presence at these development sites. This physical presence will deliver on-site skills and encourage the take up of apprenticeship placements for construction companies working on our key development sites.

**Reviewing the Ashford Skills Strategy** – Recognising the range of relevant actions contained within the Ashford Skills Strategy, it will be important to review the strategy in light of the changing economic circumstances and the priorities of the Strategic Economic Framework.

### RELEVANT PRIORITY ACTIONS from Ashford Skills Strategy

- Developing priority skill sets with respect to core skills, technical skills for specific priority sectors and core employability skills
- Raising standards in Ashford’s state schools and FE provider
- Sustained efforts to increase the range and number of progression opportunities
- Annual Learning and Skills Action Plan which aggregates school, FE, HE workbased and Adult Education Provision

### Creating a learning culture

6.23. In developing the Framework, stakeholders have identified the need for a greater emphasis on engaging effectively with young people to create demand and interest amongst young learners which will in turn raise aspirations and ambition to learn and gain further skills throughout their working life.

6.24. Ashford’s Programme of Development originally contained proposals for the development of a Learning Campus as a landmark development in the town centre, which would play a central role in creating a culture of learning across the Borough. The importance of the Learning Campus is reflected in the Skills Strategies and is highlighted as key strategic priority. However, the impact of the recession and the state of public sector finances, exacerbated by the over commitment of LSC funds, now mean that it is no longer possible to deliver, at least in the next five years, the Learning Campus as a ‘physical statement of intent’, as it is referred to in the Skills Strategy.
6.25. Despite this, partners recognise the importance of these issues and the need to work together to improve the skills of local people. Recognising this, work is already underway to develop an Ashford Learning Partnership and a Partnership Accord. This will be a lower cost alternative project that will bring together partners to agree and undertake work on: developing a curriculum relevant to the developing needs of the Ashford economy and relating this to a collaborative offer using the relative strengths of each partner; and, looking at opportunities for a building project (more likely to be achieved through rationalisation and refurbishment than through new build) to accommodate this enhanced offer.

6.26. In terms of creating a learning culture the following actions are recommended:

- **Establishing the Ashford Learning Partnership and agreeing the Learning Accord** – Commitments should be sought to the proposed Ashford Learning Partnership, which will be administered by the Ashford Partnership Board. Partners should build upon the draft Learning Accord and take proactive steps to improving the FE and HE offer, providing a viable alternative to the Learning Campus.

- **More effective IAG** – There is a need for a more innovative and focused guidance programme, with a focus on up to date priority sectors, skills and occupations which meet employer needs – as identified in the Skills Strategy. Schools and career advisers need to be updated in fast-changing job opportunities, using new ideas such as the Young Chamber initiative.

- **Apprenticeships** – When local authorities take over responsibility for the provision of 14-19 Diplomas and Apprenticeships, the Council should work closely with employers to maximise these opportunities - linked through improved education and business linkages.

- **Wye Campus for research and Educational uses** – Higher education courses have now been phased out at this Imperial College site, having had a long history of delivering agricultural and horticultural courses and research. Support should be given for the examination of re-use proposals with Imperial College to seek to provide continuing academic, research or related business activity that helps continue past associations with environmental research, agriculture or horticulture. This will assist in retaining local employment and expertise in this sector, whilst providing the opportunity for local higher education provision within the Borough.

### RELEVANT PRIORITY ACTIONS

- Developing the Learning Campus
- Improvements to the quality of IAG
- Active campaign to promote learning and make Ashford a ‘Learning Town’

### Engaging Ashford’s Employers

6.27. Building relationships with local Ashford employers, of all sizes and types of business, is a fundamental requirement for building a skilled workforce for the future. The development of a demand-led learning system as recommended by the Leitch Review of Skills, with employers having a stronger voice in developing the skills base, requires an effective degree of engagement between providers, public bodies and employers. The Skills Strategy concludes that “there appears to be limited business engagement with the learning and skills agenda locally, which makes it difficult for learning providers to respond by providing demand-led provision”. This leads to businesses being unaware of what the learning offer is and to providers finding it difficult to establish exactly what business needs are.

6.28. The Leitch Report found that UK firms had suffered from under-investment in the training of their workforce over a long period and set tough targets for 2020, to make UK ‘world class’ in skills by that date.

6.29. A recent study\(^{26}\) recognised a ‘long-term engrained issue’ and called on Government and

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\(^{26}\) Skills in the Recession, TUC, 2009
HR managers to increase their commitment. Government point to a doubling of the number of apprenticeships, increased flexibility in Train to Gain funding and a raft of measures to help address the impacts of the recession. In January 2009 the TUC called for an alignment of skills policy with industrial policy and suggested sectors such as transport, construction, renewable energy, green manufacturing and the science and technology sector where particular training incentives should be focused. In the Budget the Chancellor responded by focusing on UK growth sectors.

6.30. Employers have found it difficult to identify provision and when they did it often failed to meet their specific needs. When they did find appropriate courses they frequently found that cost prohibited take-up, particularly for small firms with limited numbers of staff.

6.31. In terms of engaging Ashford’s employers the following actions, which have emerged from the stakeholder discussions, are recommended:

- **Continue to develop the Employer Liaison Service** – The service, which was established in 2009 following the approval of the Skills Strategy, will account manage employer relationships in the borough and provide a single point of contact for businesses and a networking service on employment and skills issues.

- **Develop an employer-led curriculum** – The integrated skills and learning system should have at its core a vocational and skills curriculum for all key providers which has benefited from participation by a wide range of employers throughout the Borough. The curriculum, planned and evaluated annually, should be based on an assessment of labour market intelligence and quantitative and qualitative input from employers.

- **Education and business linkages** – School work experience should be improved to be more intensive, with better preparation, induction and review. Teachers require more training and experience in modern workplaces. The 4-day swap pilot being run in Canterbury should be rolled out in Ashford and the Studio School project should also be considered where SMEs come into schools and work intensively with 16-19 year olds. Business linkages should be improved for local graduates and college students too.

- **Ashford’s Future Skills Pledge** – The Pledge is intended to stimulate a greater uptake in skills development and deliver the government’s public procurement policy. It requires that contractors and suppliers engaged to work on GAF3 projects commit to workforce training and pre-entrant placements. The programme will involve pre-employment delivery partners and other partners responsible for stimulating upskilling in the workforce.

- **Modular and flexible courses** – Funding flexibilities should be maximised to allow employers to build courses from a modular menu, which meet their specific skills needs while providing the required levels of accreditation to meet government’s strategic objectives for upskilling.

- **Greater value for money** – Group size is crucial and is a particular barrier for small firms facing high unit costs. Partners should work to combine demand by encouraging employers to collaborate to share provision. This clustering of employers with similar skills needs could be facilitated by the Skills Contact Centre.

**RELEVANT PRIORITY ACTIONS from Ashford Skills Strategy**

- Establishing an Ashford Employer Skills Board to review and sign off an annual Learning and Skills Action Plan
- Creating an Employer Liaison Service
- Planning of learning and skills should reflect anticipated employer needs, and accommodate the specific requirements of new companies
- Management of relationships with key local employers to include skills alongside other issues
- Ashford's marketing as a business campaign should emphasise the towns growing strength in skills
- Joint planning and development with surrounding areas to assess labour market trends and in promoting the area to inward investors
7

DEVELOP THE ASHFORD OFFER

In the light of the progress already made in bringing investment to Ashford and in preparing the conditions for further development and growth it is important to ensure the core employment and housing work is complemented by schemes and proposals which round off the Ashford offer in areas such as culture, tourism and the environment – and that this offer is presented in the most effective way through a compelling narrative and brand identity.

7.1. The stakeholder consultation stressed the need to develop in tandem a programme to enhance the cultural and tourism offer in Ashford town centre and the surrounding rural areas as well as making sure that Ashford’s story is told coherently and confidently.

7.2. Stakeholders agreed that the cultural offer in the town is currently limited and needs to be increased to provide for a growing population. The cultural offer can be defined quite widely, incorporating not only formal performance spaces and arts venues but also more informal opportunities such as streetscene and places for residents and visitors alike to gather, attend events and participate in community activities.

7.3. With regards to the more formal cultural offer, the use of existing venues with sensitive adaptation can be a sensible way forward and the public investment in St Mary’s Church is a good example of investment in the performing arts.
7.4. Ashford has made excellent progress in recent years in developing and promoting its tourism product and reference has already been made to this – employing some 3,500 people across the borough, in rural areas as well as increasingly in the town, with a focus on the retail component of “destination Ashford”. In the last visitor impact study it was shown that Ashford attracted 370,000 overnight visitors and around 3.3 million tourism day trips. Of the £180m of visitor spend, 13% went on accommodation, 35% on retail, 30% on catering, 10% on attractions and entertainment and the remaining 12% on transport.

7.5. Ashford’s tourism offer is promoted and marketed collaboratively with four neighbouring local authorities under the Heart of Kent brand and an effective public and private sector membership body has been established – Ashford and Tenterden Tourism Association. An Ashford Tourism Development Framework has been in place since 2006 with an emphasis on improved quality; the cultural and sporting offer; enhancement of the rural “String of Pearls” approach; and opportunities arising in areas such as the town centre and in business and conference tourism. The opportunities to promote Ashford as “the Gateway to East Kent” is worth exploring as part of the promotion and marketing offer, in the light of the high speed train services and motorway improvements.

7.6. The opportunities going forward include business tourism, cultural tourism, the rural offer and sports and environmental tourism.

7.7. The brand identity is a key component of the offer – getting the message out to potential investors, businesses considering locating or doing business in Ashford and potential visitors. Ashford is changing and has already built up a portfolio of successful projects and developments. The Council and Ashford’s Future are working with partners on developing the brand and the strategy for disseminating it to potential audiences.

7.8. A key strand of the Ashford’s Future Marketing and Communications strategy is to develop a range of marketing and communications materials that will articulate a clear vision of Ashford. Harrison Fraser have been working with partners to take this work forward.

7.9. In light of these issues, we suggest three key priorities for developing the Ashford offer:
- Further develop and promote Ashford’s cultural offer;
- Develop and promote Ashford’s tourism product; and
- Develop the narrative and brand identity.

Further develop and promote Ashford’s cultural offer

7.10. The partners recognise the limited cultural offer and are bringing forward plans to enhance it – across a wide range of interventions aimed at formal and informal arts and performance space as well as the public realm and streetscene improvements in and around the historic town
centre. This will have a beneficial impact both on local residents in terms of quality of life and on the potential to attract visitors to the town from around Kent and beyond. It links very closely with the tourism offer.

7.11. The key actions for stakeholders to take forward include:

- **Developing further cultural product across the Borough** – for Ashford to develop as a destination there is a need to further enhance the Borough’s cultural offer. Ashford’s Future and the Council are currently developing St Mary’s Church to create a 500 seat arts and performance space in the historic town centre church while retaining its role as a place of worship. This sensitive project will also involve the local community and voluntary sector which has a key role to play in the development of the cultural offer. Completion of the first phase is expected in 2010. Previous consideration was also given to an ambitious 5,000 seat arena for Ashford to act as a venue for music, sports and popular culture which would provide a sub-regional hub that does not currently exist. The partners have indicated a commitment to revisit the proposals in the context of supporting the cultural offer for a growing population and an extended catchment area in the light of the high speed rail service. A flexibly designed venue would also provide opportunities in the business tourism and conference market. A key issue is likely to be the business case and how to address any potential revenue shortfalls especially in the early years.

**Develop and promote Ashford’s tourism product**

7.12. The partners are developing opportunities throughout the borough to build on the existing impact of the visitor economy, closely linked to the cultural offer above. The Ashford tourism product is wide ranging from traditional rural attractions such as Tenterden and Wye and the surrounding areas of natural beauty, to the more recent retail destination tourism epitomised by the Designer Outlet, and the opportunities for special interest holidays in areas such as water sports, business tourism, vineyards, walking and other rural activities.

7.13. The promotion of “destination Ashford” and its role within the wider heart of Kent grouping of local authorities will also require some consideration to ensure the overall impact on the borough is maximised.

7.14. The priority actions include:

- **Focus on growth sectors and increasing overnight stays** – The partners should work together to draw up a new plan for the visitor economy which considers how to develop further the existing successes as well as incorporating the opportunities which have arisen as a result of the growth programme. The focus should be on generating staying tourist numbers particularly in the rural areas – but also within the town centre and in the development areas immediately surrounding...
the town. This will involve the provision of new hotel and other accommodation facilities such as farm diversification self-catering and new hotels within the town centre, station area and new development areas. It will also involve the creation of integrated product development and promotion such as packaged and tailored holiday opportunities in growth sectors.

- **Conningbrook Park** – Home to the Julie Rose Athletics Stadium and the Conningbrook lakes, this site has the potential to be developed into a new sub-regional recreation and tourism attraction, bringing visitors and spend into the Borough. Development of leisure and recreational facilities to complement the existing sporting and water-based facilities should be investigated.

### Develop the narrative and brand identity

7.15. The narrative is already being well developed through materials such as the Ashford Briefing, the high level “Ashford best placed in Britain” message with its supporting website. The work currently being undertaken by Harrison Fraser is focused on further developing Ashford’s values and essence and, in light of this, developing a set of marketing collateral that will bring the vision alive. The first stage of this work has identified a set of new values to underpin Ashford’s best placed brand; these have been agreed as inviting, connected, fulfilling and prosperous. In addition, a new proposition for Ashford was agreed as the ‘Smart Choice’ (shorter term) and ‘Powerhouse of Kent’ (longer term) all underpinned by a new brand essence ‘new horizons’.

7.16. Consideration needs to be given to how Ashford maximises its impact beyond the borough through the Gateway to East Kent concept, through the Heart of Kent tourism opportunities and also to ensure that the rural area of the borough benefits fully from the development of the narrative and brand campaign.

7.17. The priority actions include:

- **Developing the narrative and brand identity** – The Council and Ashford’s Future should continue working with partners such as the Chamber, the new merged college, the Ashford and Tenterden Tourism Association, Southeastern Railways – and with Locate in Kent and SEEDA – to develop its message and the most effective method of disseminating it to the key audiences.

- **Developing specific items of collateral that will bring the vision for Ashford alive** – Professional advice in this respect will be vital and resources will need to be identified going forward. The story is good and getting better and every opportunity should be taken to shout about it, but in a way which achieves maximum impact.
8.1. The previous sections have identified an extensive set of objectives and actions required to drive forward Ashford’s economic growth and development. While action is needed across a wide range of areas it is unrealistic to assume that all of the actions are of equal importance or that they can be moved forward at the same pace.

8.2. Chapter 2 identified five high priority actions which are considered especially important because of their transformational nature, their importance in terms of urgency or unlocking consequent economic opportunities, or their role in addressing particularly serious barriers to growth and economic performance.

8.3. Previous sections have also referred to the increasing pressures being placed on public sector resources and the current lack of accessible private finance as reasons why it may be that early progress cannot be made against all of the actions included in the document. Therefore this is another reason to focus on actions with greatest urgency and with the maximum capacity to create sustainable economic benefit.

8.4. Therefore, there is a clear need to prioritise those actions that will help to deliver the overarching strategic priorities, namely:

1. Maximising the opportunities for business attraction and growth arising from the introduction of the domestic high speed train service;

2. Securing infrastructure improvements that will stimulate employment creation opportunities;

3. Accelerating plans for the Commercial Quarter and enhancing the town centre;

4. Establishing an effective and responsive dialogue with Ashford’s top employers; and

5. Addressing Ashford’s skills deficit, enhancing the further and higher education offer and promoting work force development.

8.5. This section focuses the suggested programme of actions for the next three years which will support the delivery of the strategic priorities outlined above.
Governance Arrangements

8.6. The specific delivery and reporting arrangements for each of the suggested actions are set out in the body of the following table, but the overall progress in delivering the programme of action will be kept under review as part of the Ashford’s Future and Ashford Borough Council business planning processes.

8.7. Ultimate ownership of the Economic Development Framework and the associated actions lies with the Ashford’s Future Board although close cooperation will be maintained with the Council Executive on all matters of real importance.

Reporting and monitoring

8.8. The relevant bodies to which the delivery agents will report are set out in the body of the Action Plan. It will be for these bodies to establish the criteria for reporting – including frequency, levels of detail and identification of appropriate performance indicators.

High level comparative indicators

8.9. We will also draw up a small number of high-level economic monitoring indicators which can be used to track the performance of the Ashford economy in comparison with national and regional trends. This will allow the partners to assess how well the local economy is doing in comparative terms and will inform what needs to change in terms of the focus of actions. These indicators will draw on the existing Kent County Council economic reporting and on the Ashford Borough Council annual monitoring report.
## Priority Actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Maximising the opportunities for business attraction and growth arising from the introduction of the domestic high speed train service</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Promoting Ashford’s connectivity to London</strong></td>
<td>Completion of high speed train marketing campaign and roll out of Ashford Marketing Strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Proactive targeting of future investors</strong></td>
<td>Produce an inward investment strategy and implement the programme of activity to increase new job creation</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Developing specific items of collateral that will bring the vision for Ashford alive</strong></td>
<td>Development of marketing collateral as part of the Harrison Fraser work</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Securing infrastructure improvements that will stimulate employment creation opportunities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secure funding for M20 junctions and other infrastructure</strong></td>
<td>Delivery of Junction 9, Drovers Roundabout and Victoria Way road infrastructure improvements</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Secure funding for M20 junctions and other infrastructure</strong></td>
<td>Confirmation of funding and approval for the development of Junction 10a of M20 motorway</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Address Eureka Park power supply issues</strong></td>
<td>Confirm outcome of TIF application and identify future funding options</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Facilitate the delivery of Superfast Broadband infrastructure to all new developments</strong></td>
<td>Delivery of fibre to the premises in at least one new development</td>
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### Accelerating plans for the Commercial Quarter and enhancing the town centre

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Milestone</th>
<th>Timescale</th>
<th>Lead</th>
<th>Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accelerate plans for the Commercial Quarter project</td>
<td>Completion of the masterplanning of the Commercial Quarter and procurement of a development partner</td>
<td>Masterplan completed by Spring 2010</td>
<td>SEEDA/Ashford Borough Council</td>
<td>SEEDA funding for masterplanning allocated</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Development partner secured by Spring 2011</td>
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<td>Finalising proposals for Elwick Place</td>
<td>Successful masterplanning, planning application and development of the Elwick Place scheme, providing office, retail and leisure space</td>
<td>Development agreement in place by Spring 2010</td>
<td>SEEDA/Ashford Borough Council</td>
<td>SEEDA funding for masterplanning allocated</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Planning permission secured by Spring 2011</td>
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<td>Joint Venture arrangement to fund development</td>
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### Establishing an effective and responsive dialogue with Ashford’s top employers

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<th>Priority</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Milestone</th>
<th>Timescale</th>
<th>Lead</th>
<th>Resources</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop a strategic account management system with Ashford’s top businesses</td>
<td>Establish a new Top 50 Employers Forum with contact with each company at least once a year</td>
<td>Winter 2010</td>
<td>Ashford’s Future Company/ Employer Liaison Group / Ashford Borough Council</td>
<td>Existing staff resources</td>
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<td>Ensure that the Business Link offer is responsive to Ashford’s needs</td>
<td>Increase the take up of business support by Ashford companies through signposting to Business Link and the Chamber of Commerce</td>
<td>From Spring 2010</td>
<td>Business Link/ Ashford Borough Council/ Ashford’s Future Company</td>
<td>Existing staff resources and marketing budgets</td>
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### Addressing Ashford’s skills deficit, enhancing the further and higher education offer and promoting workforce development

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<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Milestone</th>
<th>Timescale</th>
<th>Lead</th>
<th>Resources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop an employer-led curriculum</td>
<td>Completion of a curriculum review for Ashford and identification of a solution to future capital improvements in FE/HE facilities</td>
<td>Review completed Spring 2010</td>
<td>Ashford’s Future Partnership</td>
<td>Resources from GAF3 secured and seeking match funding from partners</td>
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<td>Delivery form Autumn 2010</td>
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<td>Develop effective education/business linkages</td>
<td>Work with Employer Liaison Group to engage with local businesses and promote workforce development</td>
<td>Review arrangements Spring 2010</td>
<td>Ashford’s Future Partnership</td>
<td>Existing staff resources</td>
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<td>Delivery 2010-2011</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ashford’s Future Skills Pledge</td>
<td>Uptake of sills pledge by GAF3 contractors and suppliers and development of modified version for all Ashford employers</td>
<td>Review arrangements Spring 2010</td>
<td>Ashford’s Future Company</td>
<td>Existing staff resources</td>
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</tbody>
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