

**KENT INVICTA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE**  
**EAST KENT ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GROUP (EKEDG)**

**Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> January 2025**

**Venue: The Shoreline, Folkestone Seafront, Folkestone**

**1. Welcome and Apologies**

**Members Present:**

Ray Johnson (RJ) – Chair  
Jayne Miles (JM) – Dover District Council (*Minutes*)  
Lindsey Biggs (LB) – EKC Group  
Andrew Cruttenden (AC) – Martello Building Consultancy  
Daniel Sangiuseppe (DS) – Castlewood Hotels  
Steve Wisbey – NIC Instruments Ltd  
Philip Clapham (PC) – Smith Woolley  
Gavin Coleman (GC) – Handelsbanken  
Jim Martin (JM) – Leader, Folkestone Hythe District Council

**Apologies:**

Ella Brocklebank (EB) – Jenner  
Jason Lewis – Stantech  
Richard Christian – Port of Dover  
Tudor Price (TP) – KICC  
Matthew Arnold (MA) – Stagecoach  
Paul Roberts – Metroline Security  
Craig Styles – McIntyre Hudson  
Andrew Pledger – Barclays Bank

**2. Minutes of Previous Meeting:**

Agreed.

**3. Outstanding Action**

Nothing outstanding.

**4. Chairman's Comments and Report**

- a. **RJ welcomed** GC from Handelsbanken & JM, Leader of Folkestone and Hythe District Council (FHDC) to the group and thanked Shoreline for hosting the meeting (we have not been in a Penthouse flat before). RJ will share notes from the previous meeting with JM.
- b. **RJ reported** that a recent paper evidenced that there is a reducing labour market in Kent, particularly in construction and manufacturing. Employers are concerned about the increased National Insurance contributions and potential changes to employment law.

- c. He provided an overview of British Chambers and the work along with KICC are focusing on including international trade, LSIP 2, Devolution and trade corridors. He also mentioned the flexible and focused networking and training opportunities available which was endorsed.
- DS added that retail and hospitality businesses are also laying off staff due to increase costs and some are closing their doors in March.
  - SW reported that NIC Instruments are now recruiting non-employees and are considering changing the company's business model.
  - AC added that their outsourcing arm's business is very busy. Businesses are using them and deferring any permanent employment decisions.

## 5. Sector Updates

### **Jim Martin leader of Folkestone and Hythe District Council (FHDC) provided an update:**

- FHDC are expecting Shoreline to resubmit their planning application today with some amendments.
- Devolution: KCC has applied to be on the priority list to form a Mayoral Authority and should find out shortly if they have been successful. If Kent are chosen:
  - the 14 District/Borough Local Authorities will be disbanded to make larger unitary authorities and become 'One Stop Shops' for Council services. Local services may be given to town/parish councils
  - the KCC elections (due this May) will be postponed for a year and then replaced in May 2026 with a vote for a new Kent Mayor. At the same time there will be an election for the new unitary councils
  - the new unitary councils will act as shadow authorities for a year to build up capacity.
- Otterpool: F&HDC are about to sign a collaboration agreement with Homes England giving them six months to agree a Joint Venture arrangement.
- Levelling up fund - Folca building: funds have been earmarked. FHDC are about to let the contract for external repairs to the building. Internal arrangements are well progressed and there are two key tenants on board.
- Road of Remembrance: Surveys have been completed. A permeable net will be installed to hold the cliff in place and work should be completed late Spring. FHDC are bringing forward other stabilisation work to curb cliff slides.
- JM thanked Smith Wooley for their role saving the Folkestone Leisure Centre.

### **(Local Authority - Dover) JM reported:**

- Major projects: 'Dover Beacon' (Levelling Up project) is progressing well. The refurbishment of Dover's Maison Dieu historic building is now due to open in May 2025. Tides Leisure Centre in Deal is to be rebuilt and will include a six-lane pool and a toddler splash pad. The newly improved Roman Painted House will be back open from March and

DDC are working on a grant application to uncover the Roman Bath House next door to create a tourism hot spot.

- The UK Shared Prosperity Fund has been extended by a year, DDC's allocation is £327k. The scheme has changed slightly. No news on the Rural England Prosperity Fund.
- DDC are working on a new 'Invest in Dover' website.

**(Manufacturing Consultancy) SW from NIC Instruments Ltd reported:**

- NIC Instruments had had their most successful year ever despite the huge challenges that Brexit has created for the business. Most orders are being shipped to Ukraine funded by several European countries. A new product is about to be released to market.
- The impact of leaving the EU has had a significant impact on exporting manufacturers, carnet costs are very high and there are other costs that aren't widely known about. Importing also has significant issues with more customs requirements from Germany than other countries.
- The amount of UK exports to EU has significantly dropped.

**(Construction Consultancy) AC from Martello/KPO reported:**

- Martello have a full order book which includes 8 housing projects with DDC and one with FHDC. They are also working on the Folkestone Triennial and a new play park and recently worked on Hawkinge Community Centre car park. KPO (their outsourcing company) has seen steady growth with more SMEs now choosing to use outsourcing to expand their businesses.

**(Property) PC from Smith Woolley reported:**

- The property market is subdued but Smith Woolley has high levels of occupancy and very little bad debt. There are no signs of growth within the sales market but the rental market is booming. Recent positive articles on Folkestone are helping.

**(Education) LB from EKC Group reported:**

- The college landscape is changing with Government focussing more on skills and introducing the apprenticeship levy (a tax paid by employers with a payroll of more than £3 million which is used to fund apprenticeship training).
- A new CEO is to be appointed at EKC.
- EKC has a new Stakeholder Plan which LB will share with members – please give feedback via the online survey.

**(Hospitality) DS reported:**

- January is always the worst month of the year in the hospitality industry and this year is no different. This follows a relatively good December (parties and Christmas day lunches all fully booked around Folkestone).
- The biggest concern in the industry is the changes to employment law coming in April. DS attended a reception at the House of Parliament to discuss the impact of the changes

with 80 MPs. A wide variety of attendees all reported that their businesses will suffer. National Insurance changes will impact DS alone by £80k. Business rate relief is also coming down. Nationwide lots of hospitality businesses are closing.

- Finding skilled staff is also a challenge.

**(Banking) GC from Handelsbanken reported:**

- Most of Handelsbanken's customers are established businesses and property developers. At present most are reticent to invest. Interest rates are still an issue, the market expected the base rate to have been lowered by now and are hoping for a reduction next month. Lots of refinancing rather than financing for new purchases.
- There's lots of pressure from government around sustainability in banking - every deal needs an assessment.
- City centre businesses are returning to offices (reducing home working) – this may make moving to the coast less popular.

**6. Any other business & topics**

None.

**Meeting closed at 11.30. RJ thanked all for their attendance and input and to Doug & Sara for hosting.**

**Date of next meeting: 26<sup>th</sup> March 2025 could be Thursday 27/05/25 – EKC tba**