

Enterprise and Ambition

Dartford's Economic Development Strategy 2025-2027



DARTFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL



1. Introduction

In Dartford, we are proud to be a diverse, enterprising and hard-working Borough. We want Dartford to be one of the best places in the UK to start and grow a business – and where there are opportunities for everyone to progress in work. This Strategy sets out what we are going to do to support responsible economic growth, recognising that good jobs and good business opportunities will help make Dartford a place where everyone can thrive.

This Strategy complements three important plans that the Council adopted in 2024:

- First, the **Corporate Plan** for 2024-27¹. This highlights economic growth as one of the Council's seven priority themes, within the context of an approach driven by a focus on practical common sense and the needs of Dartford's residents and businesses, and underpinned by our core values. The Corporate Plan makes it clear that in a dynamic economy, we will take a positive approach to change and growth, enabling local businesses to grow and adapt, attracting new businesses to invest, and making sure that people can access good work opportunities.
- Second, the **Dartford Plan**, the Borough's statutory Local Plan to 2037². The Dartford Plan sets out how and where growth should happen: taking a long-term view, it outlines a strategy through which Dartford can become increasingly productive and competitive, continuing the strong record of regeneration and transformation over recent years.
- Third, **Planet Dartford**, the Borough's Net Zero Strategy, which as well as setting a target to reduce the Council's carbon emissions to net zero by 2030, sets out how we will work to help businesses and others in the Borough to reduce theirs.

Both the Corporate Plan and the Dartford Plan consider a wide range of issues relating to Dartford's future prosperity and growth – and the Dartford Plan is underpinned by a very extensive evidence base.

This Strategy does not seek to duplicate this: instead, it focuses on **what the Council will do over the short to medium term to support the Borough's economy**, recognising that economic growth will have benefits to all aspects of wellbeing in the Borough.

To support our economy, we also need to **work in partnership** – with businesses, other councils, Government, Ebbsfleet Development Corporation, education providers and others. So this Strategy is about how we work with others and 'make the case for Dartford', as well as what we can implement directly.

Strategy structure

The Strategy is structured in eight main sections:

- **Section 2** sets out the context for action.
- **Section 3** introduces four key themes, which **Sections 4-7** describe further
- **Section 7** outlines how we will measure progress.

Values – and links with our priority themes

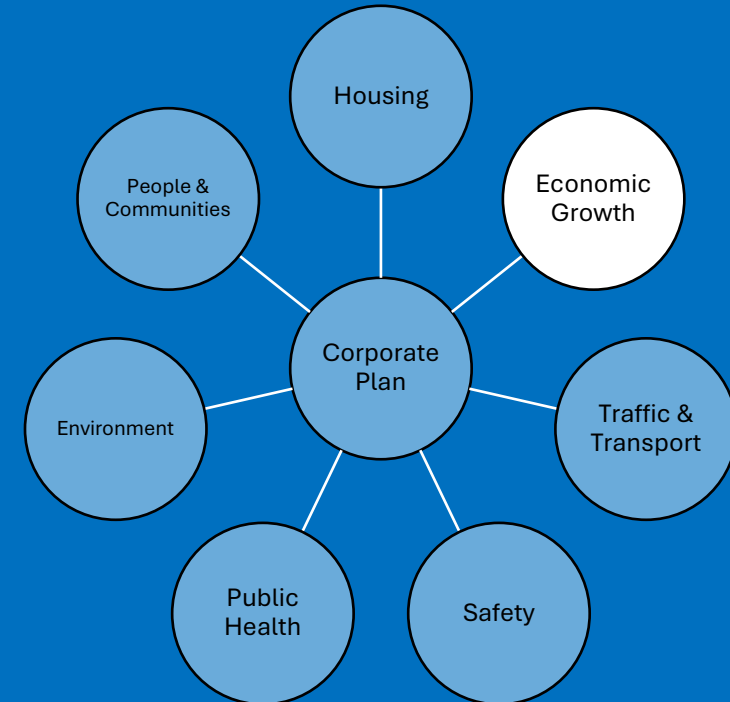
Our values

Our values are set out in our Corporate Plan. They underpin everything that we do to support sustainable economic growth:

- Value for money. We will be clear about what we are doing, why we are doing it and how we measure the effectiveness of what we do. We will also strive to improve wherever possible
- We will champion equality, diversity and safeguarding
- Valuing council staff and capturing enthusiasm and passion to deliver excellent services for our residents
- Accessible services for all
- Celebrating the character, heritage and best of Dartford Borough
- Working in partnership and lobbying/influencing others wherever possible to lead and drive positive improvements
- We will maintain sustainable council finances and strong governance and ensure transparency in decision making

Our priority themes

The Corporate Plan identifies seven priority themes. This Strategy focuses on economic growth – and will complement and add value to all other areas of activity:



2. Dartford's economy today

Dartford is an industrious, enterprising Borough. Our population is relatively young and diverse and is growing rapidly. Businesses are expanding across a wide range of sectors, generating annual output of about £4 billion and we have a strong record of job creation. We also benefit from our links to London and beyond, although transport congestion is a significant constraint. This section sets out a picture of Dartford's economy and its opportunities and challenges, informing our future strategy.

Spatial picture

Dartford is a relatively small Borough – just 28 square miles. But it has a long history of productive industry and innovation: Henry Wellcome established Dartford as a major centre of pharmaceuticals research and production, with the paper-making, engineering, quarrying and cement industries all becoming major employers and leaving a significant mark on the landscape.

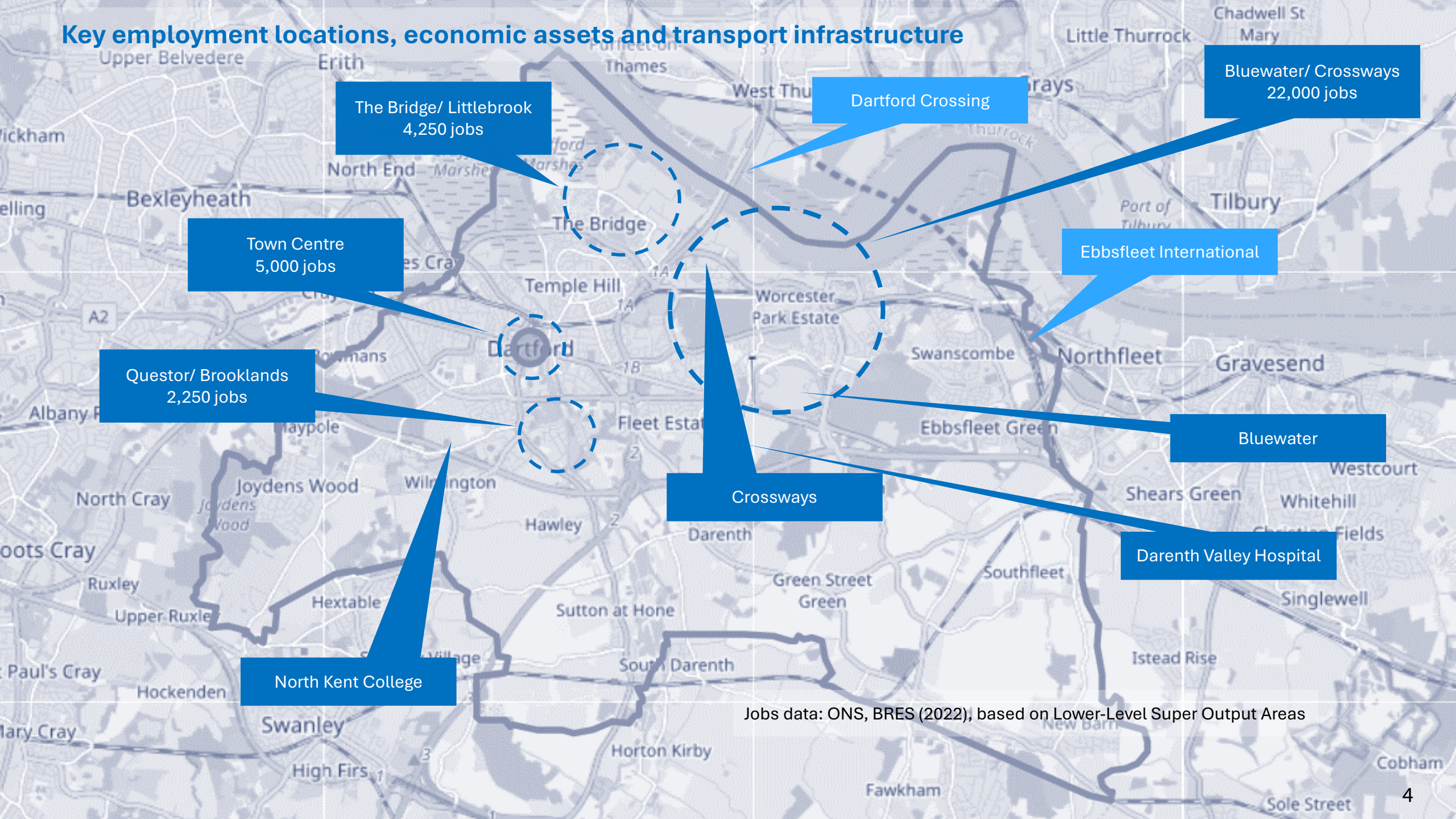
Dartford's economy has transformed in recent decades, linked with the growth and regeneration of the wider **Thames Estuary**. Building on some of the sites formerly used by our major industries, it now contains some of the South East's most important economic assets, including **Ebbsfleet International** rail station, the **Dartford Crossing** and one of the UK's largest retail and leisure destinations at **Bluewater**. It is also a major business location: adjacent to the M25, **Crossways** is the largest business park in Kent, and **The Bridge** is growing rapidly.

At the heart of the Borough, **Dartford town centre** is also experiencing transformation, as its resident population grows and its role as a cultural and service hub expands. Other parts of the Borough are also seeing new communities develop, especially at **Ebbsfleet Garden City**, where some 3,500 new homes have already been delivered towards an ultimate goal of 15,000 within an outstanding environment, linked with existing communities at **Swanscombe and Greenhithe**.

But there is much more to be done: as the new Dartford Plan observes, Dartford town centre has great untapped potential, building on the significant progress of recent years, and there is much opportunity still to be delivered at Ebbsfleet.

Dartford's housing growth and employment land is concentrated north of the A2, within the urban part of the Borough, contiguous with Gravesham to the east and Bexley to the west. To the south, the rest of the Borough is **rural** and within Metropolitan Green Belt. But rural Dartford makes an important contribution as well, a home for locally-based small businesses within an entrepreneurial economy.

Key employment locations, economic assets and transport infrastructure

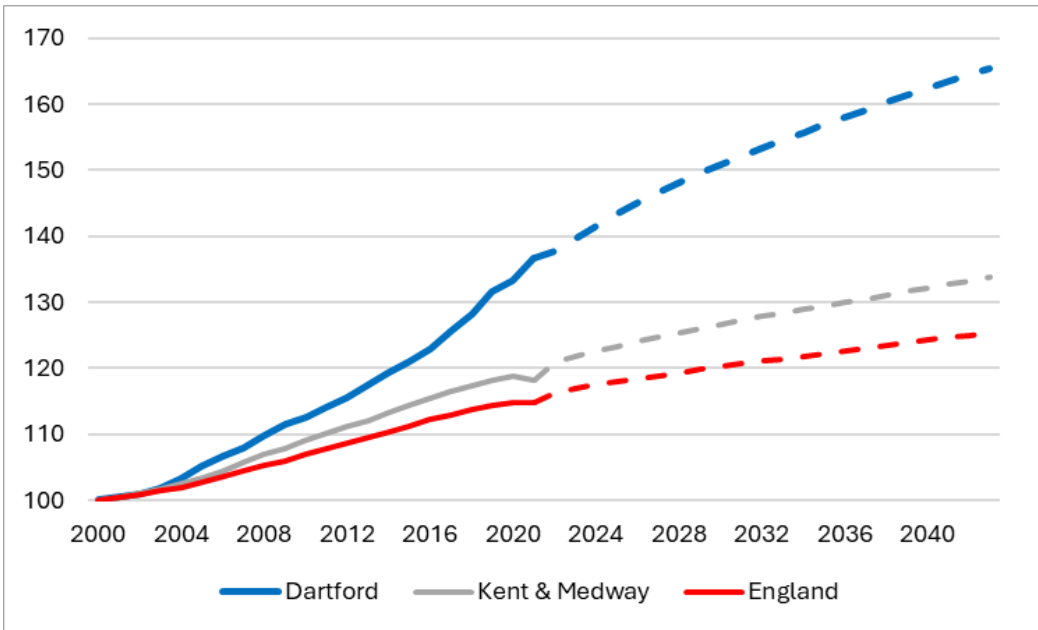


Jobs data: ONS, BRES (2022), based on Lower-Level Super Output Areas

A growing population...

In 2022, there were around 119,000 people resident in Dartford. The past couple of decades have seen very rapid population growth: there were 33,000 more residents in 2021 than there were at the start of the millennium. Projected growth to 2040 is also much faster than in the rest of the UK, supported by major housing growth at Ebbsfleet Garden City and across the Borough.

Index of population growth (2000 = 100)*



Source: ONS, Mid Year Population Estimates and population projections (2018-based)

The median age in Dartford was 37.2 in 2022, compared with 40.7 across the UK – making Dartford one of the youngest local authority areas outside London and the university cities. We are increasingly diverse: at the time of the 2011 census, the Borough was slightly *less* ethnically diverse than the rest of England: by 2021, it was substantially more so³.

Looking to the future, we anticipate continued growth in younger age groups: between 2018 and 2030, Dartford's population aged between 16 and 64 is anticipated to grow by 14%, compared with 2% in England overall. This is important to our future growth potential: it means that we have a dynamic population with a rapidly growing number of working people, many of whom will also want to start and grow their own businesses – and it stands in contrast to the ageing demographics of much of the country. Ensuring a supply of good quality employment opportunities and enabling this rich pool of talent to progress and thrive in work will be especially important.

... with more jobs

Dartford has seen jobs growth in recent years. This partly reflects the UK's generally buoyant labour market, but over the long term, jobs growth has been impressive – an increase of about 57% between 2000 and 2021, compared with population growth of around 37%. Consequently, the number of jobs per 'working age' resident has increased over time: currently, there is approximately one job for each person aged between 16 and 64, with around 75,000 jobs across the Borough⁴.

3. Census 2011, 2021.

4. ONS, Jobs Density. Three year average, 2020-22 to smooth out volatility in local data

... in a sectorally diverse economy

This growth in jobs has occurred across a wide range of economic activities.

Wholesale and retail is the Borough's largest sector, accounting for some 12,000 jobs in 2022. The sector has seen some decline in job numbers over time, reflecting structural challenges. But it still accounts for a larger share of employment in Dartford than it does nationally, reflecting the presence of Bluewater, one of the country's leading retail destinations, which continues to perform strongly and which has diversified in recent years.

A further 10,000 people are employed in **administrative and support services**, a large sector in Dartford relative to the rest of Great Britain and which includes a number of facilities management and equipment hire services. 9,000 people work in **distribution**, with Dartford's M25 location reflected in the range of large logistics operators in the Borough, such as Europa Worldwide and Amazon.

Construction is also strongly represented locally, with the major national construction firm Laing O'Rourke, Moat Homes and Brown & Mason all based at Crossways, as well as many smaller building, demolition and installation businesses.

Health accounts for around 10,000 jobs, mostly responding to growing demand in an expanding population, although Darent Valley Hospital has a wider regional function. Health-related activities have been recognised as offering potential for growth at Ebbsfleet.

Professional, scientific and technical services and information and communications are less well represented in Dartford (although analysis has indicated a stronger concentration in these sectors at Crossways)⁵. But areas such as information technology are growing quite strongly, and the sectoral landscape is changing rapidly as new technology leads to the emergence of new products and services and changes traditional definitions. Outside of conventional sector definitions, there is also evidence of relatively strong growth in the creative sector⁶.

... with dynamic and entrepreneurial businesses

There were around 5,480 businesses in Dartford in 2023⁷. While these include some of the larger firms referenced above, some 82% were micro businesses employing fewer than ten people, broadly in line with the national picture.

Business growth has been strong in recent years. In the decade to 2023, Dartford's total business stock grew by around 37%, compared with 20% nationally. There are also some indications of wider entrepreneurialism: overall 'enterprise density' (the number of businesses relative to the working age population) is slightly higher in Dartford than it is elsewhere; and in 2022, there were more start-ups as a proportion of the total business stock than the national average⁸.

Demand is also high at Dartford's innovation and business centres, such as Basepoint north of the town centre and the Nucleus at The Bridge – with the latter reporting interest from a wide range of business types, reflecting the Borough's sectoral diversity⁹.

5. Ebbsfleet Development Corporation/ Hatch Regeneris (2019), Inclusive Growth Strategy

6. Dartford Borough Council (2020), Dartford Employment Needs Assessment

7. Measured as local units

8. There were 655 new enterprises in Dartford in 2022, equivalent to 12.4% of business stock. This compares with a start-up to stock rate of 11.5% in the UK as a whole.

9. Consultation with The Nucleus

... a hardworking and skilled workforce

Nationally, economic activity rates fell somewhat in the aftermath of the pandemic. In Dartford however, **levels of economic activity have been consistently higher than the national average:** in 2023, 86% of people aged between 16 and 64 were economically active (compared with 78% in the UK overall), and of them, about 86% were in employment. That still leaves a couple of thousand people in the Borough who are currently inactive, but who would like to be able to work if they could: helping them to secure the right health and other support to access work will be especially important in a tight labour market.

Over time, workforce qualifications have improved: some 20% of working age people had no formal qualifications at the start of the millennium, a figure which had fallen to around 7% by 2020. At the same time, the proportion qualified to degree equivalent level doubled, from about 20% to 40%. This largely parallels the national picture and reflects the evolution of the workforce, as older workers retire and younger (generally better qualified) workers enter.

However, recent analysis covering the whole of North Kent identified three related workforce skills challenges, which are relevant to Dartford¹⁰:

- First, aligning the jobs market and workforce skills, in relation to areas where there is rising demand overall (for example in the social care sector); areas where technology change is driving demand for new skills (for example in advanced digitalisation and decarbonisation); and ‘generic’ but important skills that apply to all businesses (such as management skills and customer service)

- Second, the growing need for adult up-skilling, re-skilling and lifelong learning in response to changing labour market conditions. This is important if people are to progress in work and reach their potential – and it will become more important as working lives get longer.
- Third, increasing engagement with employers – including the many small and micro businesses that make up the great majority of Dartford’s business stock.

Much is already underway to address these challenges, including through the Local Skills Improvement Plan developed at county-wide level. Dartford also has some important educational and skills assets, including **North Kent College’s** main campus, which has seen substantial investment in recent years and the network of grammar and secondary schools. Linked with the Borough’s rapid growth, we also have substantial experience of ensuring that local people are able to access the job opportunities created by new developments, building on the success of the award-winning, and long-established **Learning Shop** managed by North Kent College at Bluewater. Dartford is also home to a large private sector vocational training offer, with major employers such as Amazon engaged in apprenticeships and training.

... cultural and heritage assets

Especially important in the context of our growth agenda, Dartford is a significant centre for cultural life, from its place in popular cultural history as the home of the Rolling Stones, through the Orchard Theatre’s position as the leading regional theatre in North Kent and North Kent’s College’s nationally-significant role as a centre for performing arts and design. Developing the Borough’s arts and heritage offer has long been central to our strategy, especially in Dartford town centre, supporting local identity and quality of life.

10. Greater North Kent (2021), Greater North Kent Workforce Skills Evidence

... an outward-looking focus

As the 'spatial picture' at the start of this section indicates, **Dartford is an outward-facing Borough**. Our economy is strongly associated with that of London and the Greater South East: in 2011, some 38% of all working residents of Dartford travelled to London to work (including Central London as well as much shorter journeys to Bexley and South East London)¹¹, and London is important as market for many of Dartford's service businesses. Looking the other way, Ebbsfleet Garden City straddles both Dartford and Gravesham, and there are strong links with the rest of North Kent and South Essex.

Opportunities beyond the Borough are also reflected in workforce pay. **Rates of pay are higher in Dartford than the national average** (although living costs in the South East are higher). But people who are resident in Dartford and work outside the Borough earn more than those who work locally, reflecting the higher wages commanded in London¹².

... and important connectivity strengths (and constraints)

Reflecting this outward-facing nature and our close association with the rest of the South East, Dartford is a well-connected place: proximity to the M25 is a key location driver for many of our key businesses. Our rail infrastructure is well used: as well as high-speed services from Ebbsfleet International, Dartford station is the busiest in Kent, and our smaller stations at Greenhithe, Swanscombe, Stone Crossing and Longfield also offer frequent connections to London and the rest of the county. The Fastrack bus rapid transit network also provides sustainable transport connectivity between central Dartford, Bluewater, Ebbsfleet and the Borough's key employment locations.

However, proximity to some of the UK's most important transport infrastructure comes at a cost. Delays caused by congestion were cited by almost all business consultees as key barriers to growth, with much of this linked with the lack of resilience at the Dartford Crossing. While plans are underway for major investment in the **Lower Thames Crossing** (which will also open up greatly improved access to Essex), local measures to reduce traffic volumes and provide alternatives to car use will also be important.

What this means for productivity

The Dartford Plan aims to promote higher productivity. Ultimately, productivity is the key driver of economic growth: increasing the amount of 'value' generated for the same amount of time worked is the way in which living standards are most likely to rise in the long run – and it is the route to increasing efficiency and reducing our carbon footprint. In recent years. The UK's productivity performance has been relatively weak, compared with other major economies, and there is a significant national focus on reducing this 'deficit'.

Measured as gross value added per filled job, Dartford's productivity averaged £55,900 in 2019-21. This is slightly below the UK average – although since the UK average is skewed by central London and a small number of 'high performers', it is still in the top third of all local authorities nationally¹³. At local level, productivity measures are not very robust. But broadly, recent data indicates that the Borough performs reasonably well – but has scope to do better in the context of its assets and growth potential, if some of the constraints that hold it back can be overcome.

11. Census 2021 commuting data is strongly skewed by the Covid restrictions that were in force at the time

12. Gross weekly pay (3 year average 2021-23) is £733 for Dartford residents, £723 for people working in Dartford, and £647 across the UK. (ONS, ASHE)

13. ONS, GVA per filled job (current prices). 3 year average to smooth volatility

Bringing it together: Dartford's economic opportunities and challenges

Looking across this overview of the state of Dartford's economy and its future prospects for growth:

- **Overall, the Borough has a well-performing economy.** It is in the top 20% of local authority districts nationally for both economic activity rates and median resident pay, and in the top third for productivity.
- **Much of this is underpinned by positive fundamentals,** which present an optimistic outlook for future growth. The working age population has grown rapidly and is set to expand further. But the rate of job creation and growth in the business stock have both run ahead of population growth.
- **The local economy is relatively broad-based.** Although there are some larger employers, it is not reliant on a small number of major firms, it is sectorally diverse, and neighbouring economies (especially London) are strong.
- **There is an under-representation in those sectors typically regarded as 'high value'** (such as financial services, information and communications and professional and scientific services). There ought to be opportunities to grow Dartford's presence in these areas, given local concentrations at Crossways and the potential of Ebbsfleet and Dartford town centre.
- **However, there are high-value activities in all sectors** (e.g., construction, in the context of the transition to net zero), in all sectors and there are high-quality, good employers across a resilient and diverse economy,

Looking to the future:

- **'Supply side' constraints are the major barriers to growth.** Most obviously, these include severe congestion on the road network, linked with the resilience of the Dartford Crossing and the effects that this has on the surrounding local network. With significant housing and commercial growth anticipated, better public and sustainable transport will be important, alongside nationally-significant investment in the Lower Thames Crossing.
- **In a growing economy, it will be important to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to reach their potential.** Economic activity rates are high – but there are still people who want a job but are unable to access work, and there are people in low-paid work who would benefit from progression in workplace – benefiting businesses within the Borough as well as wider community prosperity.
- **'Quality of life' and 'quality of place'** are important drivers of economic growth. We want to retain people and businesses locally and encourage more to join us, in a rapidly growing and evolving community. Building on Dartford's heritage and cultural offer is important in developing the town's distinctive identity, businesses. supporting an economy that works for existing and new residents as well as for businesses.
- **Economic resilience will also need to be seen in the context of long-term, structural drivers of change,** especially widespread decarbonisation, the development of new products and processes through digitalisation and demographic change. While these drivers are relevant *everywhere* (and Dartford is less vulnerable than some other parts of the country), ability to adapt will be important to our growth prospects over time.

3. Priorities for action

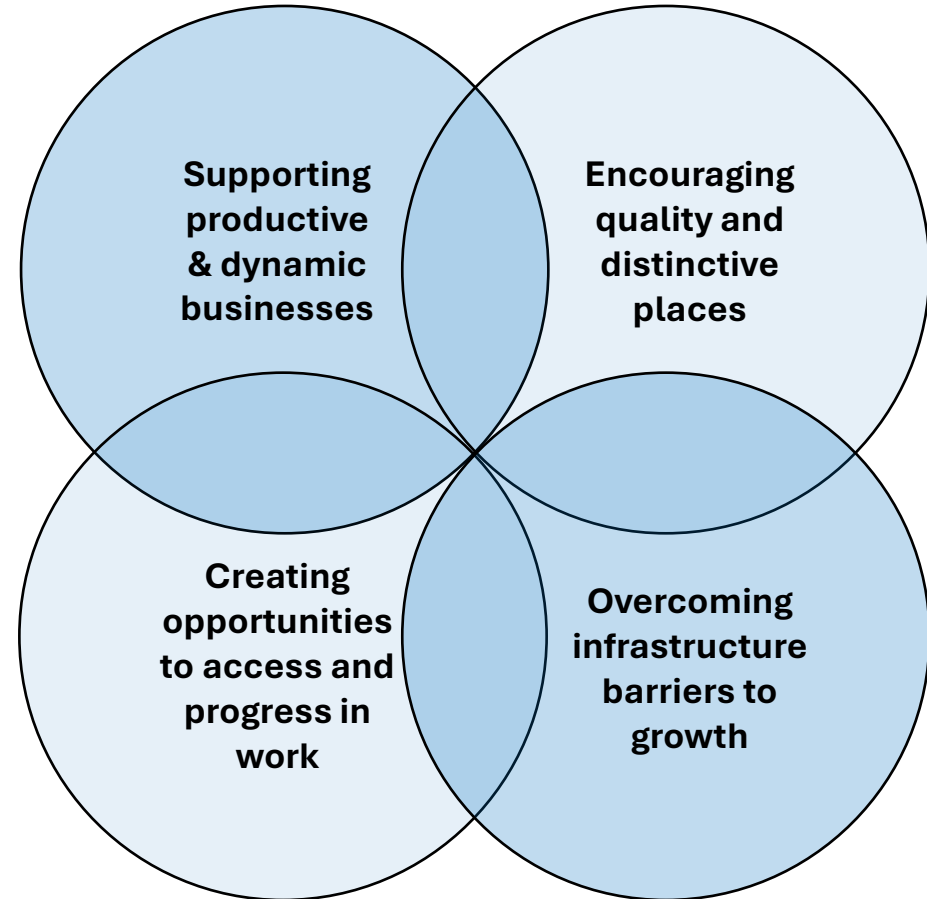
As the previous section demonstrates, Dartford is a growing and dynamic Borough. Over the next three years, our focus is on making it an even better place to grow a business and to thrive in work. This section sets out our priorities and the actions we will take to deliver them.

Four priorities

We have identified **four priorities for action**, illustrated opposite. These are all integrated and together contribute to making Dartford *“one of the best places in the UK to start and grow a business – and where there are opportunities for everyone to progress in work”*.

In the following pages, we explain each of the four priorities: why they are important and what needs to happen. In some cases, the Council has a direct role, where we deliver services or directly manage projects. In others, our focus will on working with and supporting other partners to secure new investment and deliver what the Borough needs.

We also need to be flexible. There are often changes in the economic cycle and in Government policy and funding, and we need to be agile and responsive to new opportunities. So our priorities aren't prescriptive: they provide a framework to guide what we will do.



4. Priority 1: Supporting productive and dynamic businesses

Where do we want to get to?

Our first priority focuses on the growth of Dartford's business community. Over the lifetime of this Strategy, we want to enable:

- **More businesses, growing faster:** Dartford has seen rapid employment growth and business expansion. We want to continue this positive growth trajectory. That means enabling an environment in which new businesses can start, existing businesses can grow and investors are welcome.
- **Sustained business diversity:** We recognise and celebrate the diversity of our economy: it means that our economy is resilient to change and can offer a wide range of opportunities. We want to ensure that there are opportunities for start-ups and small enterprises, as well as larger, firms across a range of activities – especially in those that are likely to support higher pay and good jobs.
- **Strong business networks:** Dartford Council also has an open, honest and positive relationship with the Borough's businesses. We're not a commercial business ourselves, and we have to balance a range of interests to support the best outcome for Dartford residents. But engaging with business, solving problems where we can and celebrating success, is important to us: we want to maintain our strong partnerships, and we want to help businesses come together to solve problems and build local supplier relationships.

What are we going to do?

To support this priority, we will:

1. Support the delivery of Dartford's key locations for employment growth

There is high demand for employment space in Dartford. Vacancy rates are low, demand for logistics and industrial uses has been high (and accompanied by some significant developments in recent years), and this is complemented by a growing concentration of 'high value' activities in locations such as Crossways. Consequently, industrial and office rents have risen to among the highest in Kent¹⁴.

The Dartford Plan anticipates delivery of around 25,000 sq m per annum of new industrial and distribution premises, and around 22,000 sq m per annum of commercial, business and service uses, with new employment delivered principally through strategic expansions at, or additional floorspace in the employment areas highlighted at the start of this Strategy, and through diversification in the network of retail centres.

Delivery of our key employment locations is central to our growth strategy, and will also be supported by our priorities for infrastructure development outlined in Section 7. Alongside an efficient and effective planning process, we will work with businesses to find sites and premises that will meet their needs and those of the Borough, and we will work closely with partners to promote the quality of Dartford's offer.

14. Dartford Borough Council (2020), Dartford Employment Needs Report

2. Create the space for smaller, growing businesses to thrive

Within the delivery of additional employment space, we want to ensure that there are opportunities for start-ups and smaller firms to grow. That applies to all sectors, including in trades and service activities that support local needs – and, in many cases, demand across North Kent and parts of London. But we especially want to support growth in activities that are likely to be increasingly ‘knowledge intensive’ and innovative.

As part of this, we will continue to support the development of The Nucleus at The Bridge as a key business and innovation hub for the Borough, offering flexible workspace alongside innovation support, and we will support opportunities for other forms of specialist managed workspace – for example in the creative sector and to support demand for co-working space:

The Nucleus

Part of The Bridge, a vibrant new community on a previously derelict site adjacent to the M25, The Nucleus offers around 30,000 sq ft of office space within a business and innovation hub supporting start-up and growing firms.

Originally developed as a joint venture between Dartford Borough Council and the developer of The Bridge, The Nucleus is now owned by the Council. It currently accommodates some 40 small businesses working in a wide range of sectors, from advanced engineering to care and facilities management. Business satisfaction levels are very high, and The Nucleus is an important part of the wider community, with a strong relationship with the nearby Leigh University Technical College, supporting interaction between growing SMEs and the workforce of the future.

3. Provide targeted support for small and micro businesses

There is a range of business support available – ‘gateway’ services provided by Kent and Medway Growth Hub; specialist innovation and sector services provided nationally; and a variety of commercial products. We will supplement these with targeted support for small and micro businesses in Dartford where appropriate, including for young entrepreneurs, ensuring that they are complementary.

3. Build connections and celebrate success

We want to champion Dartford’s enthusiastic and hard-working business community. We will:

- Engage regularly with businesses through Dartford Town Centre Partnership and other partnerships, where we can share challenges and solutions and understand the issues that matter to local firms
- Keep in touch with key employers and investors, so that we understand emerging issues and challenges
- Celebrate the success of Dartford businesses. The annual Dartford Business Awards have gone from strength to strength, with the Council’s own sponsorship supplemented by support from a range of other partners in the private sector. By celebrating the achievements of local business, across sectors and business types, we are also celebrating the diversity and innovation that Dartford has to offer – building a strong network of firms and highlighting the opportunities across a growing Borough.

4. Provide excellent services to business – and be a good local customer

We are an efficient and responsive Council. We provide a wide range of services to business – from planning applications to licensing and environmental services.

We will be reliable and fair in the services we provide – and we will work effectively with other local service providers, such as Kent County Council.

We are also a key part of the local economy ourselves, buying goods and services from local businesses. We will pay bills promptly, and we will use local suppliers where we can and where it demonstrates value for money.

5. Priority 2: Encouraging quality, distinctive places

Where do we want to get to?

Our second priority focuses on Dartford's development as an attractive and vibrant Borough that people enjoy living in and which is a good place to set up and grow a business. We want to enable:

- **The success of Dartford town centre** as the key focal point for the Borough and the most sustainable location for a range of services and business activities.
- **A distinctive cultural offer**, which adds to Dartford's 'sense of place' and character in the context of the Borough's growth, and which also helps to develop a dynamic cultural and creative economy.
- **Environmental quality** across the Borough, including within and between key employment locations.

This priority moves beyond access to physical business space and services to support innovation and growth, recognising that the quality of the wider local offer is a vital component of local prosperity.

What are we going to do?

To deliver this priority, we will:

1. Support investment in Dartford town centre

Dartford town centre is at the heart of the Borough and is a key location for sustainable growth. Historically, the town centre has suffered from retail competition from other centres and relatively low purchasing power within its immediate vicinity – and like many town centres, it has experienced the challenge of structural changes in the retail sector.

But recent years have seen the start of transformation: substantial new housing has been completed north of the railway line, bringing more people into the town; major development at Brewery Square and Lowfield Street, south of the High Street, is coming forward, and a programme of public realm and local transport improvements is well underway.

The town centre also enjoys significant assets, such as Central Park and the Orchard Theatre (referenced further below) and good access to open space beyond the town. The town centre is also well-connected: Dartford railway station is the busiest in Kent, with multiple services to central and South East London and across the county.

In 2018, a Dartford Town Centre Development Framework was adopted, subsequently informing the Dartford Plan's vision for the town centre as including "...a diversified economy, new premises and more residents living in the town. Dartford will be the community heart of the Borough with a thriving, creative and innovative ambience". It is a focal point for the Borough, and therefore at the heart of our economic development strategy.

In support of the development strategy for the town centre set out in the Dartford Plan, we will:

- Work with landowners and investors to identify **new opportunities to diversify the town centre**, creating a more varied mix of leisure, community service, cultural and business spaces.
- As part of our commitment in Priority 1 to developing strong business networks and partnerships, continue to **build relationships with all those stakeholders with an interest in the town centre** (traders, landowners and agents, social enterprises and others), through the effective development of the Town Centre Partnership.
- Seek to secure **investment in the town centre public realm**, building on successful work completed and underway.
- **Drive momentum, pride and energy through 'smaller scale' actions** that complement capital investment, but which are important to businesses and the wider community in generating a sense of place and belonging. This means supporting regular events, investing in meaningful and relevant public art and promoting the town centre offer.

There are also **viability challenges** in bringing forward some key town centre sites. While much will be delivered through the market, we will work with Government, including Homes England, and other agencies to secure public investment to unlock major developments, where there are wider benefits to the town.

2. Develop Dartford as a centre of culture and creativity

Dartford has a diverse and dynamic cultural offer, and we place great value on the role of culture as a regenerative force. Today, key institutions include the Orchard Theatre, a leading regional theatre in Dartford town centre, the Mick Jagger Centre, and North Kent College's role as one of England's key performing arts colleges.

The Orchard Theatre... and Orchard West

The Orchard Theatre is one of the South East's leading live entertainment venues, and has operated in the heart of Dartford town centre since 1983. As a result of concerns over the presence of RAAC concrete, the theatre had to close for an extended period in 2023/24. This presented a major threat, given the risk of a loss of custom to other venues during the closure period.

The Council worked quickly to find a temporary solution, with the result that Orchard West was built as a temporary facility on the Westgate site, safeguarding theatre in Dartford town centre. This highlights the importance of flexibility, practicality and creative thinking in response to events, which is as much part of our strategy for economic development as planning for the long term.

This cultural offer is important to Dartford's distinctiveness as a place. Linked with the programme of town centre events referred to above, we will seek to develop our key institutions as the potential audience expands, especially in the town centre and at Ebbsfleet Garden City.

There are also opportunities to build a growing concentration of creative businesses in Dartford, linked with the presence of these institutions and with our growing population. There is evidence that 'creativity' has wider effects on the local economy by making places more attractive locations in which to live and work, and work is underway across the Thames Estuary to develop these opportunities¹⁵. Linked with our support in Priority 1 for a diversity of spaces for small businesses, we will encourage and welcome a creative population and creative businesses.

3. Invest in environmental quality

Across the Borough, "quality and distinctive places" will depend on the quality of the local environment, through access to green and open space. While this is principally covered in other strategies, natural capital is an important part of Dartford's offer to residents and investors: enhancing it is vital in the context of significant growth, and we will seek investment in the natural environment alongside other infrastructure.

15. See Creative Estuary (www.creativeestuary.com)

6. Priority 3: Creating opportunities to access and progress in work

Where do we want to get to?

Our third priority focuses on Dartford's workforce. As we noted in Section 2, the Borough performs relatively well on measures of economic activity and employment, and formal qualification levels are broadly in line with the national average. But progression from low pay can often be a challenge – and even with relatively high overall activity rates, there are people who would like to work if they could, but face barriers to doing so. At the same time, many employers report challenges in recruiting people with the right skills, within the context of a relatively tight national labour market.

We want to enable:

- **Better access to work** for those who face barriers
- **Better progression in work**, enabling people who are already in the workforce to gain new qualifications to improve their pay and future opportunities, and supporting retraining as the economy changes
- **Better access to the skills that employers need.** This partly means responsiveness to current demand (met, for example, through in-work learning or retraining), as well as planning for skill sets that are likely to grow in demand in the future (for example, associated with decarbonisation and constant digitalisation).

What are we going to do?

Dartford Borough Council is not a skills and training provider, nor (mostly) are we a commissioner. But workforce skills are a key driver of economic growth – and we want local people to benefit fully from the opportunities that more jobs and business activity bring.

To support better opportunities to access and progress in work, we will:

1. Support local jobs and training through development

The scale of planned growth over the next couple of decades will generate substantial demand for employment, as well as business opportunities. We have a strong track record of ensuring that local people benefit, and we will continue to pursue this. Policy M19 of the Dartford Plan requires large commercial developments of over 20,000 sq m to have an employment and skills plan setting out how training opportunities and work placements will be enabled, and we will also encourage developers to adopt employment and skills plans where schemes do not meet this threshold.

Separately, Ebbsfleet Development Corporation's **Local Employment Initiative** seeks to secure 25% local labour in the pre-construction and construction phases, with apprentices making up 5% of the workforce and a range of employability programmes to help people further away from the labour market into work.

2. Strengthen links between employers and skills providers

Within a relatively tight labour market, employers often report imbalances between the skills they need and workforce availability. Addressing this relies on the supply of in-work learning opportunities as well as the skills of new entrants to the labour market. Complementing the employer engagement activities of North Kent College and the plans set out in the LSIP, we will use our business networks to promote skills programmes and the take-up of apprenticeships and traineeships, and we will support the development of links between local employers and the Borough's private sector training providers.

The Learning Shop

The Learning Shop at Bluewater is an early example of a trailblazing collaboration between employers and skills providers, which has now become an established part of the local skills landscape.

Established in 1999 when Bluewater first opened, the Learning Shop provides access to jobs within Bluewater itself. It also provides a range of services, including help with job searches, CV development and interview techniques, delivered from an accessible location within Bluewater, as well as services to employers, including advice and support to employees at risk of redundancy.

Since its establishment, the Learning Shop has recruited around 35,000 members of staff, with about 3,500 roles advertised each year.

3. Help people into work and learning

Numerically, there are enough jobs in Dartford for every working age resident. But many people find it hard to access employment – or are unable to work as much as they would like to – because of mental and physical health conditions. While there are national programmes to support people into work, local initiatives are often very important, where they are delivered in communities and linked with wider community development activity. Through future allocations of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (or successor schemes), we will seek to support access to employment for those furthest away from the labour market, recognising the links between health, jobs and economic growth.

4. Invest in skills infrastructure

A growing population will need additional skills infrastructure. Historically, Government funding has played an important part in expanding the further education offer, although in Dartford this has been quite gradual relative to local need, despite significant recent investment at North Kent College. We will make the case for continued skills investment, where it aligns with local business and economic need.

7. Priority 4: Overcoming infrastructure barriers to growth

Where do we want to get to?

Our fourth priority focuses on the infrastructure that Dartford needs for its economy to grow and thrive. Although it is the last of the four priorities presented in this Strategy, it is very important: almost all of those interviewed as part of the development of the Strategy cited transport infrastructure as the biggest barrier to growth locally.

Ultimately, we want to see significantly improved strategic transport infrastructure serving the South East and Thames Estuary as a whole, alongside reduced congestion and a greater shift to sustainable and active travel within Dartford – enabling easier access to employment and contributing to the earlier priority of ‘distinctive, quality places’, within the context of the debonisation goals set out in *Planet Dartford*.

What are we going to do?

1. Enable delivery of Dartford’s major transport infrastructure projects

Within the Borough, these include:

- Continued investment in **Dartford town centre** (complementing Priority 2), to improve the public realm, reduce the severance effects of the town centre’s highways network and relieve congestion
- The expansion of the **Fastrack** network, linking Ebbsfleet Central and Alkerden with Bluewater
- Improved active travel and bus priority routes

2. Make the case for longer-term strategic investment

Dartford Borough Council has long made the case for investment in the Lower Thames Crossing as the only long-term solution to the severe congestion at the Dartford Crossing – the extent of which has a negative impact on connectivity across the South East.

Ministerial decision on the Development Consent Order will lead to a doubling of road capacity over the Thames Estuary. There is an urgent need – nationally as well as locally – for the Crossing to be improved and for work to start at the earliest opportunity. Once approved we will work to ensure local benefits from the development itself, as outlined in Section 6.

Looking to the longer term, we will continue to press for the commitment to extend the Elizabeth Line to Dartford and Ebbsfleet to be met, strengthening our connectivity with London; and to ensure the reinstatement of Eurostar services to Paris and Brussels stopping at Ebbsfleet.

8. Moving forward and keeping track

Contributing to economic growth and productivity...

All four priorities will contribute to Dartford's future economic growth and productivity – and all four need to be taken forward in parallel, with shorter-term actions that build confidence and deliver practical benefits today running alongside planning for longer-term strategic change that will involve many other partners.

... through a variety of funding sources

Delivery will involve several sources of investment, including from the private sector. At the time of writing, there is some uncertainty regarding the future of public sector capital funding for local infrastructure and economic development projects, following the closure of the Local Growth Fund and a number of nationally-administered funds focused on town centre renewal. However, we anticipate that similar programmes will emerge in due course, and that there will be a requirement for business case development, to which the overall priorities in this Strategy will contribute. In parallel, revenue funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund or successor programmes will be important in relation to employment and business support.

Measuring success

We will monitor progress of individual projects taken forward within the Strategy through the measurement of expenditure, project-level outputs (businesses supported, etc.) and outcomes where projects can be evaluated.

More broadly, a contextual 'dashboard' of indicators will help to provide an overview of progress. We anticipate that this will involve official data (for example, total employment, business stock, business survival rates, etc.) as well as locally-derived data relating to investment enquiries and vacancy rates.

