

# Draft Tunbridge Wells Economic Recovery Plan

## Forward

This Economic Recovery Plan forms an addendum to the current Economic Development Strategy 2018 – 2021. The Economic Development Strategy will be reviewed fully in 2021.

Since lockdown in March 2020, the Council has mobilised its resources to support businesses and communities in the borough through this difficult time. Specifically in relation to businesses the Council has:

- Distributed the Retail, Leisure & Hospitality, Small Business and Discretionary Grants schemes, with approximately £28 million sent on to borough businesses;
- Contributed to the funding for the Kent & Medway Growth Hub Covid-19 support website and phone line, with over 850 contacts from Tunbridge Wells businesses between March and September (4<sup>th</sup> highest demand for the service across the county);
- Held conference calls for local businesses with representatives from the Council, local business organisations and Greg Clark MP in March, April and October 2020;
- Supported the reopening of the borough's town centres in June 2020; and
- Supported the reopening of the hospitality sector and the wider visitor economy across the borough in July 2020.

Throughout the pandemic the Council and partners have played a critical role in supporting business and the economy. As we have moved into recovery, that role has transitioned with a need to effectively plan and ensure delivery of services for the longer term.

In preparing this plan, we recognise the uncertainty surrounding the impact of Brexit on our businesses from January 2021. The Council will need to keep a watching brief over the next six months and, working with partners, seek to support our businesses as they address the challenges and embrace opportunities as these arise.

## 1. Impact of Covid-19 on the local economy

This section of the recovery plan provides some information about the impact of the pandemic on the local economy to date. The statistics presented have been collated from a number of data sources including the Kent County Council Economic Recovery Dashboard.

Figure 1 below shows the percentage of the working age population that are unemployed in Tunbridge Wells borough (claiming either Jobseekers Allowance or Universal Credit principally for the reason of being unemployed) and compared to that of Kent & Medway and Great Britain.

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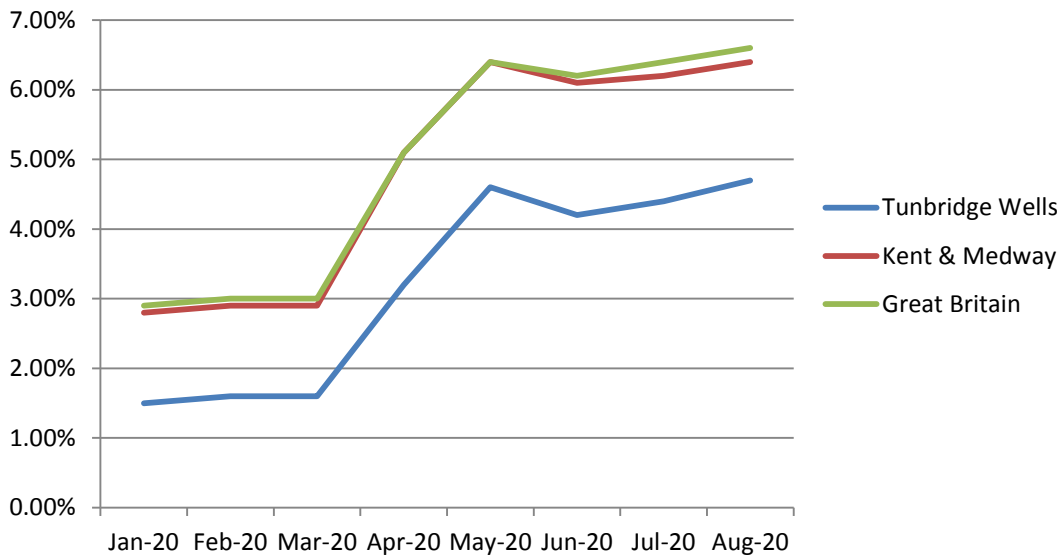


Figure 2 below shows the number of people unemployed in the borough (based claiming either Jobseekers Allowance or Universal Credit principally for the reason of being unemployed).

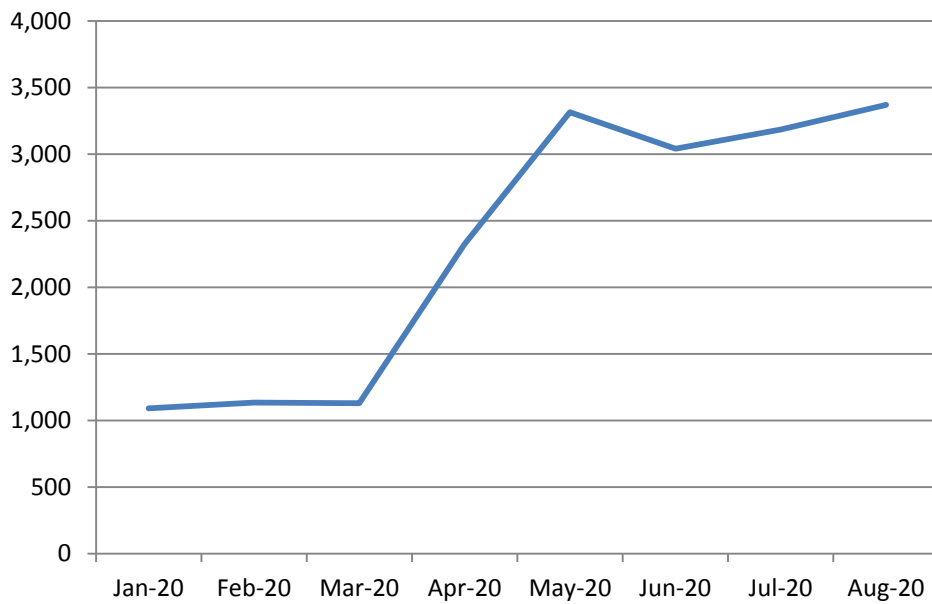


Figure 3 below shows the percentage of unemployed people in Tunbridge Wells borough across the different age groups (based on those claiming either Jobseekers Allowance or Universal Credit principally for the reason of being unemployed).

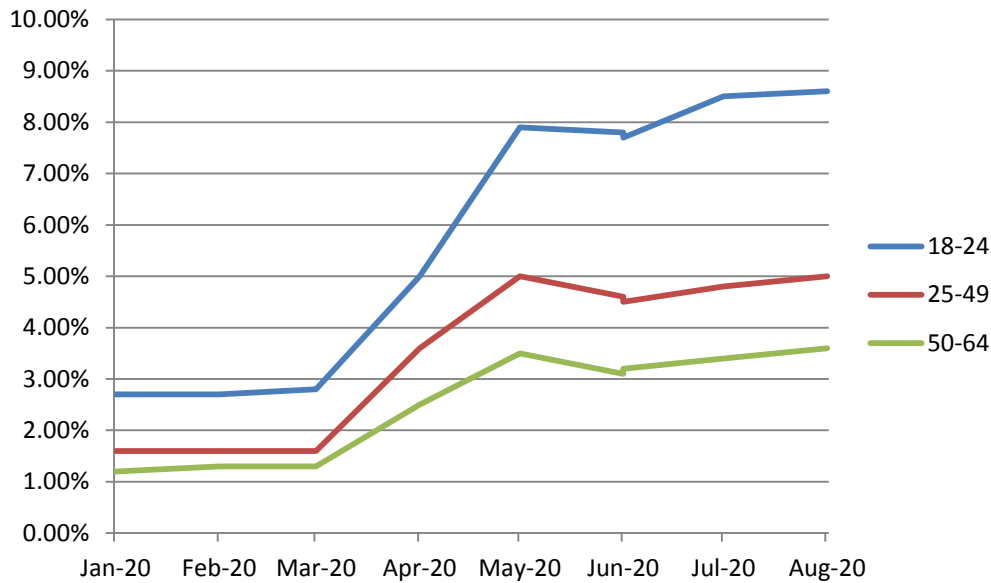


Figure 4 provides a breakdown of the percentage of unemployment across the various wards within the borough, comparing March with August 2020.

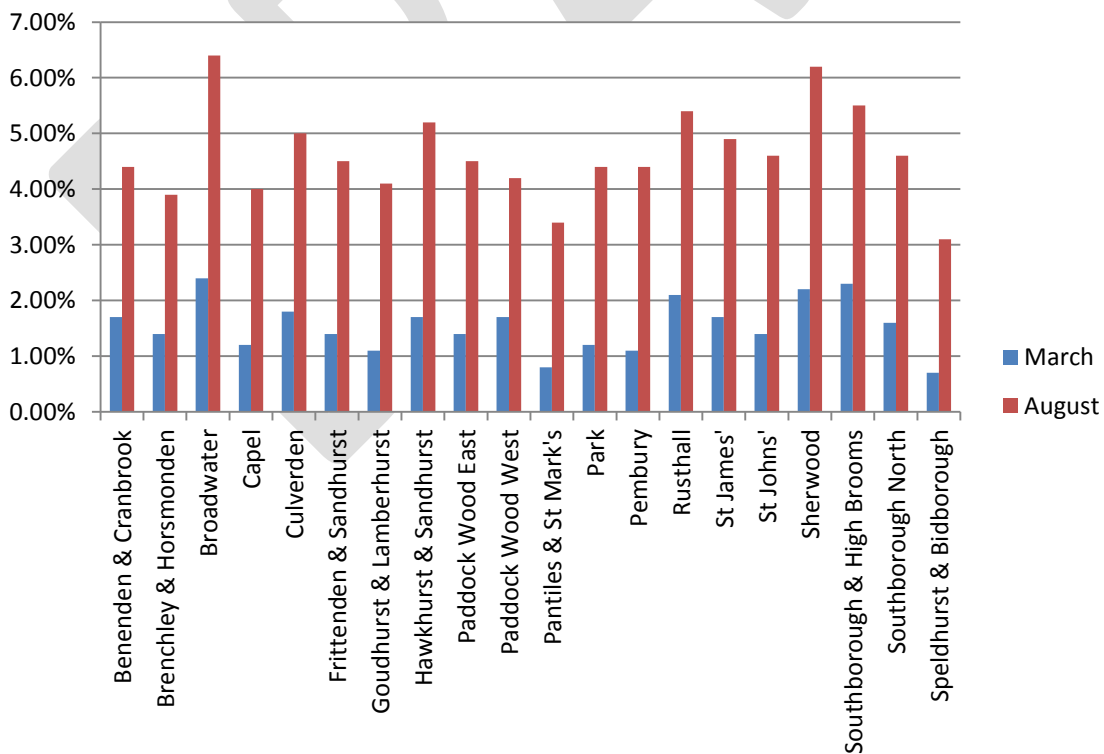


Figure 5 below provides a breakdown of the numbers of people unemployed in the borough by ward, comparing March with August 2020.

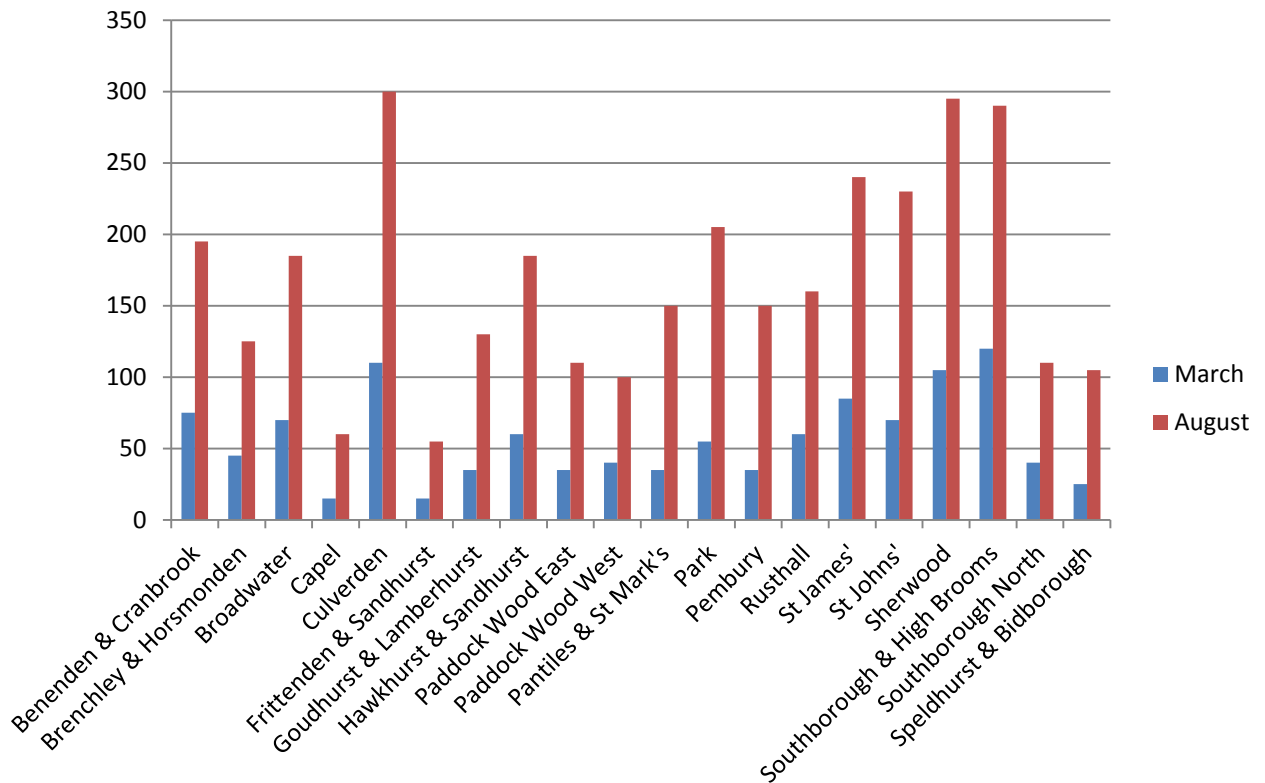


Figure 6 shows the number of people claiming Universal Credit in Tunbridge Wells borough (both in and not in work).

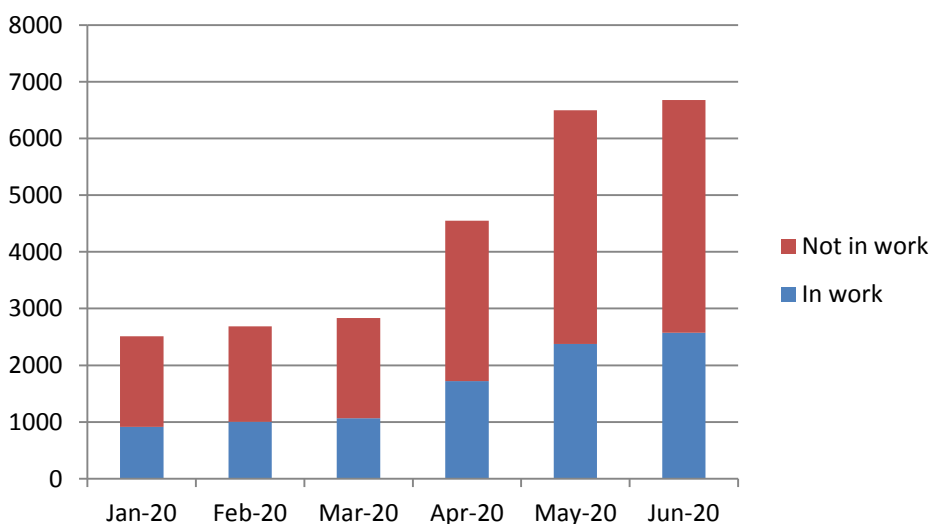
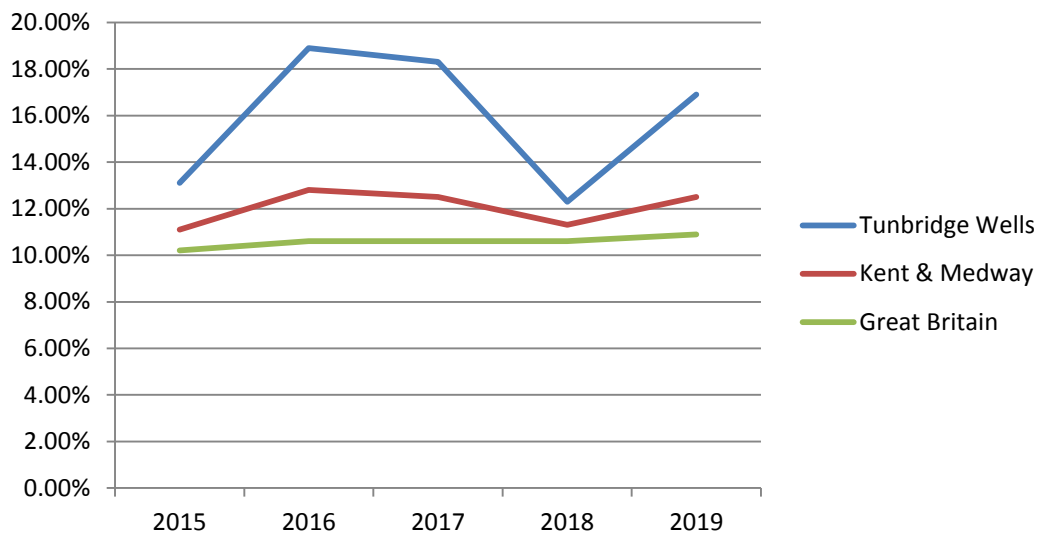


Figure 7 shows the percentage of people that are self employed in the borough (as a proportion of the working age population). The data compares Tunbridge Wells residents to Kent & Medway and Great Britain.



The following information is taken from the KCC Economic Dashboard, derived from responses to the Government's Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey and then applied to the number of enterprises within each of the individual Kent local authorities. The data therefore gives an indication of the position that businesses find themselves in across Tunbridge Wells. The data is a snapshot for August 2020.

Figure 8: Has your business received funds from any of the schemes?

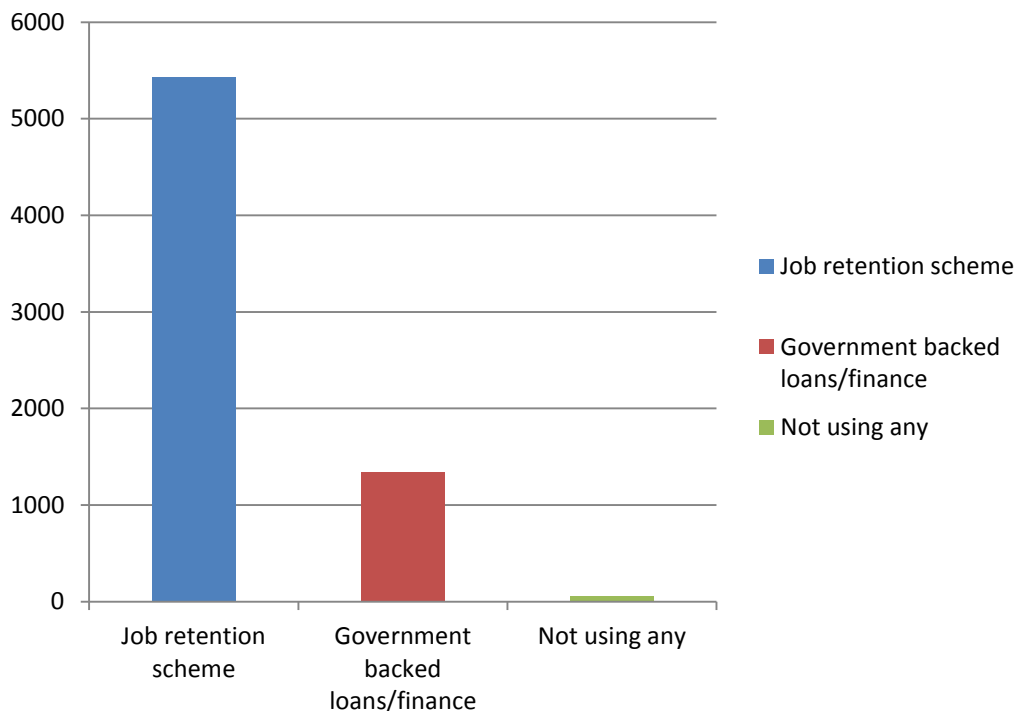


Figure 9 Is your business currently using any of the following initiatives?

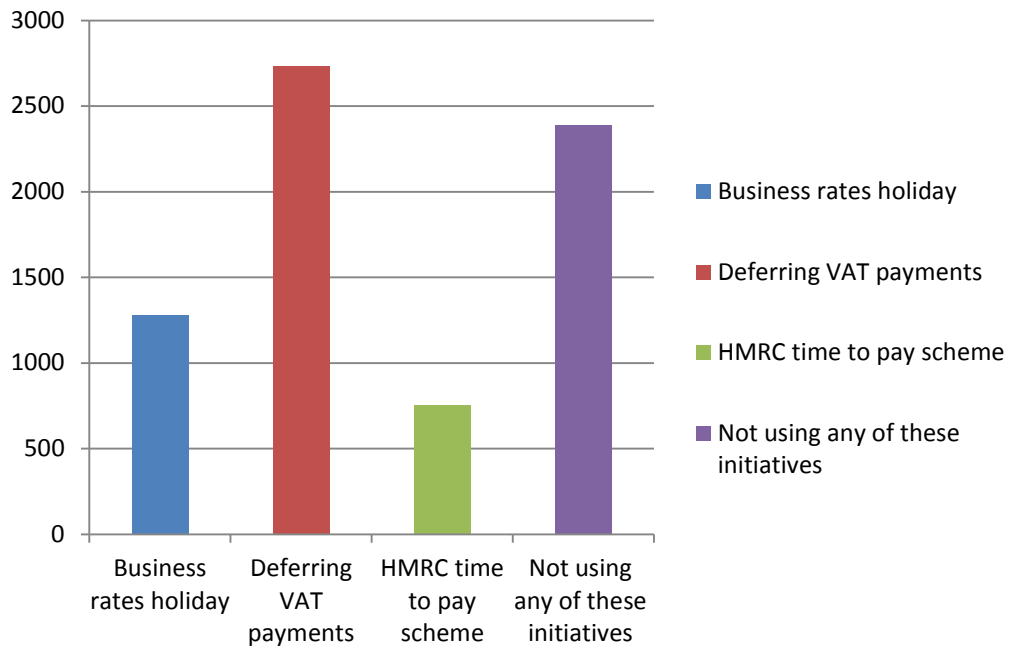


Figure 10: How long do you think your cash reserves will last?

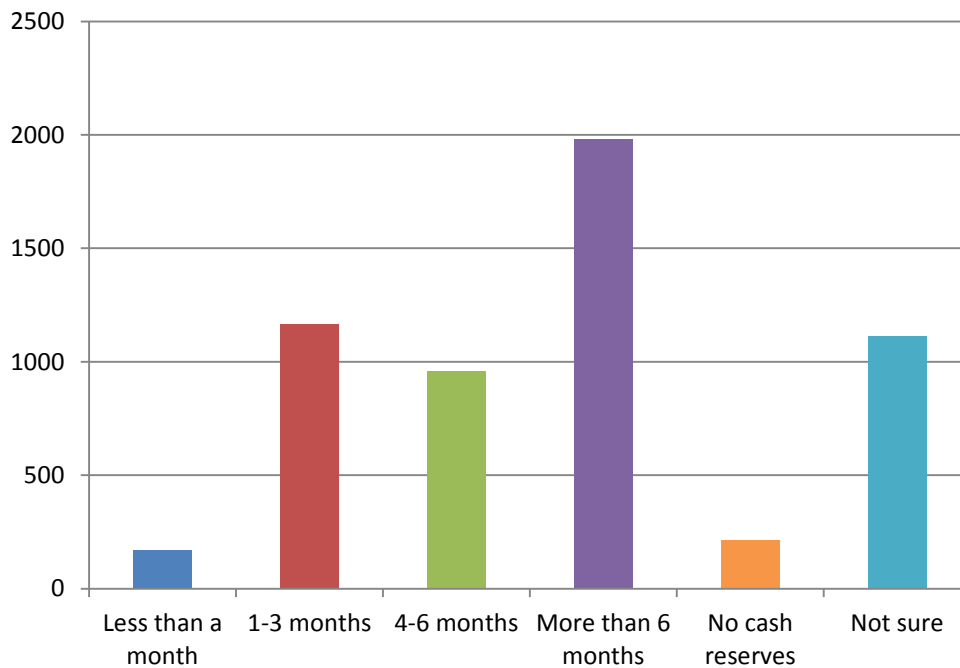
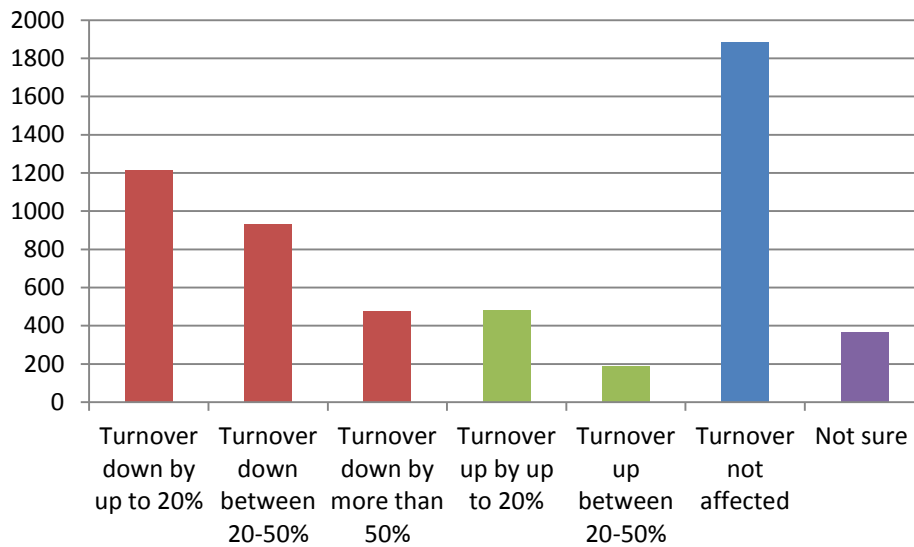


Figure 11: In the last two weeks, how has the coronavirus pandemic affected your business's turnover, compared to what is normally expected for this time of year?



Information about the impact of the pandemic on sectors in Kent & Medway is shown in Appendix A, with tourism and hospitality severely impacted.

The Council runs a Tourism Information Service (including the Tourist Information Centre in the Pantiles and the [visittunbridgewells](http://visittunbridgewells.com) website), in order to support our businesses and employees in the local visitor economy. The impact on the sector has been clear in the borough. Visits to the [visittunbridgewells](http://visittunbridgewells.com) website have fallen significantly as follows:

- April 2020 down 72% on previous year
- May 2020 down 59% on previous year
- August 2020 down 21% on previous year

The Tourist Information Centre was closed in March and reopened on 11 August. Since reopening our visitor figures have been steadily rising.

- August saw a footfall of 10-15 visitors a day, 10 phone calls and 10 emails.
- September footfall rose to 30 visitors a day with up to 10-15 phone calls and 10-15 emails.
- September has seen 3 coach parties visiting the Pantiles, with a peak to date of 52 visitors on Friday 11 September.

The key attractions in the Borough are mostly now open, with limited hours/service and many with a pre-book only policy. All the hotels Royal Tunbridge Wells have now reopened with limited capacity. The new Premier Inn opened on 21 August offering 65 or their 120 rooms.

Visitors returning to date are almost exclusively from the UK with many in the age group 50 plus. They have often replaced European/International travel with a tour of the South East (Kent & Sussex), with a strong interest in camping and caravanning.

## **2. Policy Context & Partnership working**

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council works with a wide range of partners on economic development matters and we have continued this partnership working throughout the Covid-19 emergency. A number of our partner organisations have or are preparing their own Recovery Plans and these are summarised below:

### **South East Local Enterprise Partnership**

The South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) is one of 38 LEPS, established to provide the clear vision and strategic leadership to drive sustainable private sector-led growth and job creation in their area. LEPS were set up by the government to be the key body determining strategic economic priorities while making investments and delivering activities to drive growth and create jobs. LEPS are responsible for preparing Local Industrial Strategies (LIS). SELEP's final production of this document is currently on hold as a result of Covid-19. However, SELEP has identified a number of Recovery & Renewal priorities as follows:

- Support trade & growth post Covid-19 and Brexit
- Support businesses to adapt
- Secure investment and accelerate planned growth
- Re-skill workforce and support people to (re)enter work
- Drive innovation and Research & Development
- Enable a clean recovery
- Improve digital infrastructure and skills

### **Kent & Medway Economic Partnership**

The Kent and Medway Economic Partnership (KMEP) is the economic partnership for Kent and Medway which aims to drive forward economic growth and prosperity throughout the region. It was set up in 2013. KMEP is governed by a Board and chaired by the private sector, with membership drawn from business, local government, further and higher education. KMEP published its Renewal & Resilience Plan in August 2020. The Plan sets out 5 'channels' of activity, as follows:

- **Communications, Confidence and Trust** – providing better intelligence to inform our actions and ensuring collaboration and partnership to drive our activity



- **Open for Business** – taking action to build confidence and demonstrate that the Borough is open and accessible
- **Supporting Business** – supporting resilient and innovative businesses to drive future growth
- **People** – enabling people to access work and skills and reach their potential
- **Investment** – planning and investing now for a sustainable future.

These are also underpinned by three key principles

- cleaner and greener;
- productive and open and better opportunities
- fairer chances.

A Kent & Medway Employment Task Force is to be set up. This will be temporary, task-oriented and focused on the central challenge of rising unemployment and what partners collectively need to do to limit and reverse it. It will exist in the context of the Government's proposed interventions, and will identify how these can be best supported, and where they can be supplemented by additional local action.

### **West Kent Partnership**

The West Kent Partnership is the strategic economic partnership covering the local authority areas of Sevenoaks, Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge & Malling. The WKP seeks to address economic, transport and infrastructure issues to create a stronger West Kent economy and conditions for businesses to thrive. In 2018 the WKP prepared the West Kent Economic Priorities for Growth Strategy (WKPEG). An addendum to this strategy has been prepared in response to Covid-19. The addendum proposes some potential short term measures to deliver more resilience in recovery in West Kent. An Action Plan has been developed to serve as a bridge between these shorter term priorities and the medium term aspirations of the WKPEG.

The Action Plan has an increased emphasis on the importance of skills to support sector needs moving into growth from recovery. The WKP will support the work of the Kent & Medway Employment Task Force.

Young people are particularly at risk of disadvantage by the fall-out from Covid-19 impacting on future career opportunities. In West Kent unemployment for 18-24 year olds has risen from under 2% and 480 young people in August 2019 to around 8.5% and 1920 young people in August 2020 (Nomis). It is significantly higher now than for the West Kent population aged 25-64 which stands at 4.5%. With this priority in mind the West Kent Partnership has registered as a Kickstart Gateway and aims to

be facilitating placements for young people with West Kent businesses in the first tranche of the scheme.

### **TWBC Plans & Strategies**

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Five Year Plan 2017 – 2022: The Five Year Plan is the Council's corporate strategy and focuses on what we want to achieve for our borough and for the services provided. It has an overarching vision of what we want the borough and our council to look like in the next five years, and the priorities that we believe will achieve this vision. The vision in the current Five Year Plan is *'to encourage investment and sustainable growth, and to enhance quality of life for all'*. The Five Year Plan is currently being reviewed.

Emerging Tunbridge Wells Local Plan: The Local Plan sets out the strategy for growth in the borough, both housing and business uses. The Draft Plan (Regulation 19) will be published for consultation in Spring 2021.

Economic Development Strategy 2018 – 2021: The Tunbridge Wells Economic Development Strategy was published in 2018 with the overall aim: *to seek to create the best possible conditions for business investment and sustainable growth in the borough*. Further details of the Strategy objectives are set out in Section 3 of this Plan.

Cultural Strategy 2014 – 2024: The Borough's Cultural Strategy sets out the aim *'To grow our role as the cultural centre of the Kent & Sussex High Weald, so that by 2024 the Borough of Tunbridge Wells is nationally recognised for its vibrant cultural provision'*. TWBC is part of an Arts Council England pilot to set up a Cultural Compact. This is a new model of governance, setting up a locally determined strategic partnership *to create 'whole place leadership' for culture. It is designed to create a sustainable local framework to replicate the impact of a major cultural programme. It will significantly raise levels of ambition and align investment and resources towards shared priorities'....'Compact partners will work together to create and deliver a plan to maximise social and economic benefits from a thriving cultural ecosystem.'*

### **3. Key Issues & Objectives**

The 2018 Tunbridge Wells Economic Development Strategy sets out the following objectives:

Objective 1: Place Shaping and Promotion – Enhance the attractiveness of Royal Tunbridge Wells and the other town centres in the borough as thriving cultural places to visit, shop, work and do business.

Objective 2: Accessibility & Connectivity – Develop efficient transport & digital communication networks to support the vitality and competitiveness of the borough's local economy.

Objective 3: Skills & Employability – Develop a workforce equipped with appropriate skills to capitalise on local employment opportunities.

Objective 4: Rural Economy – Develop a strong, diverse rural economy to sustain local communities.

Objective 5: Supporting Enterprise – Encourage the continued development of a wide range of enterprises in the borough, including through the provision of new workspace.

The Council considers that these objectives remain valid in the medium term, however, the Covid-19 pandemic and the challenges and opportunities relating to Brexit, necessitate some re-emphasis and additions or amendments to actions in the short term. In the short term the issues that need further focus include:

**Business Support & Engagement** – Ensuring suitable provision and signposting of appropriate support, advice and financial assistance through government and other loans and grants as a consequence of the economic impact of Covid-19 and potential impact of Brexit

**Visitor and Hospitality Sector Reopening** – To understand and support the visitor and hospitality sector issues as restrictions are lifted. To understand and plan for impact associated with an emerging local outbreak plan.

**Employment** – Identify businesses requiring support to maintain employment and growth in the borough. To understand and plan for impact associated with an emerging local outbreak plan.

**Training & Skills** – Ensure provision and signposting to provision of skills and training for businesses and individuals to re-skill and seek new employment.

**Local Plan** – Co-ordinate with the local plan for the repurposing of town centres and employment space demand in response to Covid-19 and Brexit.

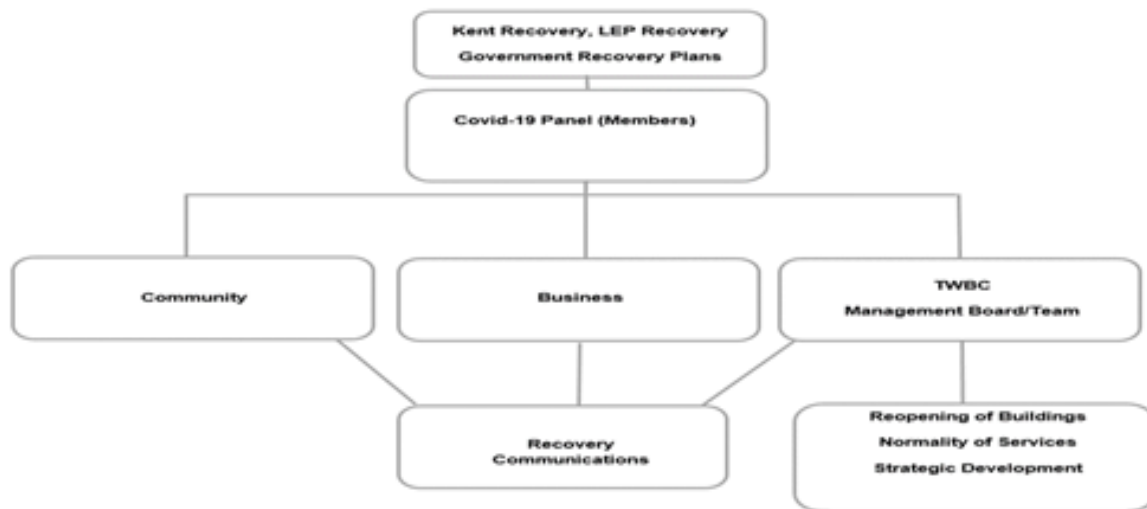
**Transport & Infrastructure** – Ensuring the approach to infrastructure meets wider requirements and builds on social and policy changes.

An updated set of actions are presented in the attached Business Recovery Action Plan.

#### **4. Delivery of the Action Plan**

The recently convened Tunbridge Wells Business Recovery Group (BRG) will oversee delivery of this Recovery Action Plan. Members include Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, Royal Tunbridge Wells Together Business Improvement District, the Federation of Small Businesses and Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce. The

BRG will work with other recovery groups within and external from TWBC as shown in the Figure 12 below:



The purpose of the Business Recovery Group (BRG) is to provide liaison and support to the business community, understand the impact of Covid-19 on businesses and the economy and assist in recovery, particularly where protections are lifted and further to monitor, understand and respond to the impact of Brexit.

The Action Plan has been prepared recognising that the levers for local economic intervention are limited in relation to the significant impact of Covid-19. However, actions in the plan include those that involve:

- lobbying central government to ensure that any new support packages address the issues faced by our businesses;
- applying/bidding for new government funding as it becomes available; and
- targeted supplementary programmes aimed at filling gaps provision with the resources available to the Council and its partners.

## Appendix A: Impact of Covid-19 on sectors from Kent & Medway Renewal & Resilience Plan

**Table 2-1: Summary of sectoral impacts**

| Sector                  | Summary impacts                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hospitality and tourism | Severely impacted, with most of the sector closed during the lockdown phase and social distancing continuing to affect how businesses are able to operate. An increase in domestic tourism demand could lead to additional activity, although there is still likely to be a substantial fall in output this year, and risks to businesses as Government support measures come to an end. |
| Creative and cultural   | Severely impacted: the crisis is likely to be protracted for the sector, with the prospect of live events and cultural activities limited for the rest of the year, and significant vulnerabilities associated with freelance employment                                                                                                                                                 |
| Retail                  | Retail spend has 'bounced back' after a sharp slump – but much of it is online. There has now been a return to mostly 'normal' trading, but the crisis will likely compound longer-term structural challenges facing the sector.                                                                                                                                                         |
| Food production         | Generally resilient in terms of demand, but there is a risk of labour supply problems, given reliance on seasonal, and often migrant, workforces                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Manufacturing           | Manufacturing has been an important driver of the small return to growth. While parts of the sector are experiencing severe difficulties at present (such as aerospace and aviation), Kent and Medway's exposure to these is relatively limited. However, most manufacturers nationally are operating below capacity                                                                     |
| Construction            | There has been sharp growth in construction activity nationally, largely driven by the residential market. Sustaining this will be important to Kent and Medway, given the relative size of the sector                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Transport               | Freight volumes have risen again since the depths of the pandemic, and the sector in Kent is nationally vital for imports and exports. But the local demand-driven public transport sector has already faced a collapse in demand, and recovery is likely to be very slow                                                                                                                |
| Education               | Higher education faces significant, potentially structural, challenges, as international students are slow to return and other sources of income are more challenging to access                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Community & voluntary   | While public services will be resilient (in employment terms) in the short term, the crisis has impacted on Kent's substantial – and diverse - voluntary and community sector (for example, through reductions in fundraising events and volunteer capacity).                                                                                                                            |
| Life sciences           | A small sector in employment terms but strategically important – and likely to see rising demand for accelerated medicines development and digital health                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

## **Appendix B: Links to Background documents**

SELEP Covid-19 Economic Response Statement

[https://www.southeastlep.com/app/uploads/2020/08/SELEP\\_Economic\\_Response\\_statement- PDF\\_EC2.pdf](https://www.southeastlep.com/app/uploads/2020/08/SELEP_Economic_Response_statement- PDF_EC2.pdf)

Kent & Medway Renewal & Resilience Plan

[https://www.kent.gov.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0014/112280/Economic-Renewal-and-Resilience-Plan-Backing-Jobs-and-Businesses-Plan.pdf](https://www.kent.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0014/112280/Economic-Renewal-and-Resilience-Plan-Backing-Jobs-and-Businesses-Plan.pdf)

Council's Five Year Plan

<https://www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/council/strategies-plans-and-policies/the-five-year-plan>

Draft Local Plan

[https://www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/343718/Consultation-Draft-Local-Plan.pdf](https://www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/343718/Consultation-Draft-Local-Plan.pdf)

Economic Development Strategy

[https://tunbridgewells.gov.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/357075/6E87D29952340414E0531401A8C0B054\\_FINAL\\_Economic\\_Development\\_Strategy\\_2018-21\\_TW1623.compressed.pdf](https://tunbridgewells.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/357075/6E87D29952340414E0531401A8C0B054_FINAL_Economic_Development_Strategy_2018-21_TW1623.compressed.pdf)

Cultural Strategy

[https://www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/366086/cultural-strategy-June-2016-low-res.pdf](https://www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/366086/cultural-strategy-June-2016-low-res.pdf)