Accountability Agreement 2026-27

1. Introduction

Our mission is *to empower our communities to develop their economic and social prosperity in a rapidly changing world.*

As an Ofsted 'Outstanding' provider, East Kent Colleges (EKC) Group provides inspirational education for 12,000 young people and adults across the six districts and boroughs of East Kent. Our purpose is to provide inclusive and accessible education that raises the ambitions of our students and enables them to succeed in their chosen pathway, whilst ensuring the curriculum we deliver is clearly linked to skills priorities at national, regional and local level. We are passionate about providing more technical education opportunities for children and young people, which includes working closely with our sister Multi Academy Trust, the EKC Schools Trust. We are a partnership driven education group with a strong sense of civic leadership responsibility and our new Strategic Plan 2025-29 sets out five clear goals:

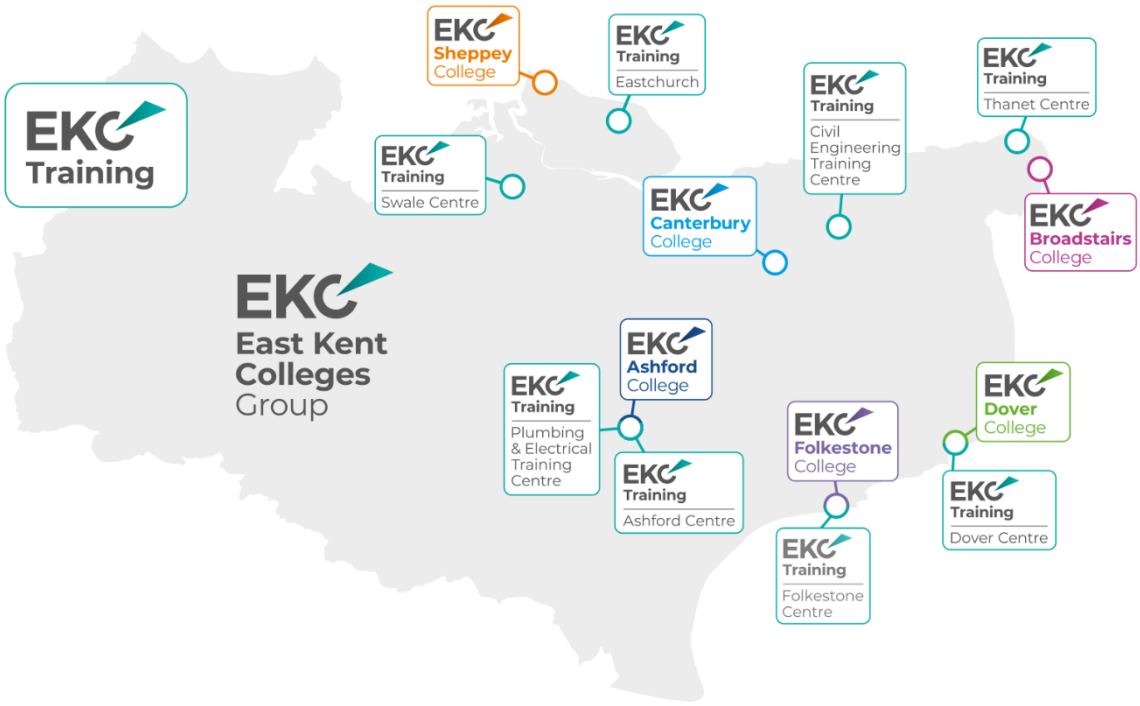
1. Building on our existing strengths, deliver a wider range of inspirational, inclusive and accessible education provision that meets the needs of our communities;
2. Ensure our learners are equipped for their next stage of life and work in a rapidly changing world;
3. Develop and deliver a range of exceptional business support and training solutions, establishing long-term partnerships with our local employers to enable them to grow and innovate;
4. Develop and invest in our people to enable them to prosper in their roles and careers, delivering transformational education and services for our communities;
5. Build on our investment in a sustainable physical and digital infrastructure, ensuring that our facilities, services and learning environments meet the needs of students and industry.

Our Strategic Plan can be found at https://www.ekcgroup.ac.uk/group/about-us/our-strategy.

2. Context and place

Since 2014, EKC Group has grown rapidly from a single-site College in Broadstairs to a family of six Colleges and an EKC Training business unit serving the whole of East Kent and each of its local communities. The Group has worked closely in partnership with key stakeholders to ensure that each College and EKC Training meet the economic, skills and social needs of its

communities, covering the districts and boroughs of Ashford, Canterbury, Dover, Folkestone and Hythe, Swale, and Thanet. Each Business Unit has a Local Board which includes representation from local employers and the relevant local authority. As the Group serves a distinct geographic area, it delivers a co-ordinated curriculum provision, providing clear progression pathways, whilst specialising where appropriate to meet local needs, and maintaining a College presence in each of our six districts and boroughs. The Group also works to strategically meet the requirements of 'communities of need' such as those learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This approach ensures the Group can carry out its mission and appropriately serve each of its communities.



Business and economic profile: in common with the rest of Kent, 90% of East Kent businesses employ nine or fewer people, but these micro-businesses account for just 31% of employment, whilst businesses with 50 or more employees account for nearly half (46%). Current employment is focused on health, retail, education, hospitality, and manufacturing. The Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) has identified the following priority sectors that are important to the region:

- Adult social care
- Construction and the built environment
- Creative industries
- Fresh food, horticulture, agriculture and viticulture
- Manufacturing and engineering

- Tourism and visitor economy

Alongside these sector priorities, the LSIP also recognises the strategic importance of Ports, Transport and Logistics, and Health and Life Sciences as emerging areas.

Social needs: there are major social challenges to be addressed:

- 105,000 East Kent working age residents are claiming Universal Credit, including 66,000 people on Universal Credit in work. The picture varies by local authority area, but Thanet has had the highest percentage of the district population claiming Universal Credit in Kent. In October 2025 more than a quarter (28.2%) of the working age population in Thanet were in receipt of Universal Credit (23,442 people). Claimants in Thanet account for 13.1% of all claimants in Kent.
- Thanet, Dover, Folkestone & Hythe, Swale, and Gravesham have some of the highest youth unemployment rates in the South East.
- In relation to children (Aged Under 16) living in absolute low-income families, three of the East Kent districts are above or the same as the national average of 19.1%: Thanet (22.1%), Dover (19.5%), and Folkestone & Hythe (19.1%). Thanet has the highest number and proportion of children living in absolute low income families in Kent (5,580, 22.1%). Swale has the second highest number (5,023, 16.3%). Almost 2 in 5 children living in absolute low-income families in Kent live in either Thanet or Swale.
- There are also significant pockets of deprivation: four of the six East Kent Districts (Dover, Folkestone and Hythe, Swale, and Thanet) are in the bottom quartile nationally in terms of the employment deprivation measure**.**

The resident qualifications profile is lower when compared nationally:

- Fewer residents have qualifications at level 3 or above (54% compared with 57%)
- Significantly fewer have qualifications at level 4 or above (32% compared with 40%).
- 40,000 East Kent residents have no qualifications at all.

Young People: Following a period of contraction, the number of 16-19 year olds has been increasing significantly over the last two years.

- By 2029 there will be around 15% more 16-19 year olds across Kent & Medway than now, an increase of nearly 8,000 potential students across East Kent, with the highest growth in Ashford. EKC Group has already seen an increase of 1,200 16-19 students since 2023/24, with growth at all six Colleges.
- Alongside the increase in the population of young people, the number of those Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) has risen to 4.8% in Kent, compared to 4.0% in the previous year.

Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND): In 2024/25, in terms of numbers of SEND support, Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and placement type, proportionally Kent had:

- fewer children and young people identified as requiring SEND support in mainstream schools (12.4% Kent;14% England).

- more children and young people (20,635) aged 0-25 years with an EHCP compared to the England average (6.2% Kent; 5.6% England).
- fewer children and young people with EHCPs educated in mainstream schools (36% Kent; 44% England).
- more children and young people with EHCPs placed in special schools, including independent schools, (39% Kent; 30% England).

Other useful reference documents include:

Kent and Medway LSIP

Kent and Medway Workforce Skills Evidence Base

KCC SEND Sufficiency Plan

Key data and information about the whole of Kent and individual Districts

3. Approach to developing the accountability agreement

EKC Group has a clear Strategic Plan, developed in consultation with our key stakeholders. We have ensured that the aims and objectives in this Accountability Agreement align with our Strategic Plan. As a key anchor institution in East Kent, it is important to note that our strategy sets out a wide range of longer-term goals and objectives. These include goals and objectives related to our civic leadership responsibilities, capital investment, and our people. In developing the aims and objectives in this Accountability Agreement, EKC Group has carefully considered national, regional and local priorities, particularly where these directly align. We have also considered our progress against the 2025-26 Accountability Agreement aims and objectives. An update on our progress is included as an appendix at the end of this document.

EKC Group also continues to implement an ambitious capital investment programme, drawing on funds such as the FE Capital Transformation Fund and Levelling Up Fund (working closely with our District and Borough Council partners). This £55m investment over the last five years has supported an improved infrastructure across the Group's Colleges to deliver a specialised curriculum linked to local needs, including:

- £7m Levelling Up Fund extension to Sheppey College providing additional engineering, logistics and creative training spaces
- £6.5m Levelling Up Fund Margate Digital campus on Margate high street as part of a wider regeneration programme
- £4.6m investment of FE Transformation and Energy Efficiency grants to upgrade poorer condition buildings across the Group to reduce energy costs

The new 2025-29 Property Strategy outlines how the latest allocation of FE Condition Funding will be deployed, with a focus on poorer quality buildings, sustainability improvements and replacement of key infrastructure that is at end-of-life including heating, cooling and glazing.

Following the publication of the 'Every Child Thriving and Achieving' white paper, and the consultation on the new SEND reforms, the Department for Education has introduced a new requirement for Colleges to include how they will use the new Inclusive Mainstream Fund. The purpose of this fund is to support the transition to a reformed SEND system. EKC Group has a strong track record of developing and delivering a wide range of inclusive and accessible provision for young people with a range of diverse needs, including SEND. We are one of the largest providers of SEND in England and deliver learning and associated support to around 1,000 students with an EHCP annually. Our High Needs provision was graded as Outstanding by OfSTED at our last inspection. Provision for SEND learners remains a key focus in our Strategic Plan (under Goal 1 – see page 1). We will use the new Inclusive Mainstream Fund as part of a wider review and development of our SEND provision, which will ensure our curriculum and learner support evolves and continues to meet the needs of young people. As a key part of this, we will also invest in staff training to ensure they are equipped with the latest strategies to support the increasing diversity of support needs.

Engagement with key stakeholders

From its formation, EKC Group has worked in a highly collaborative manner with its network of partners for the benefit of our communities. This has remained a core strength of the Group, with the development and consolidation of strategic partnerships with many organisations from a wide range of sectors and areas.

The Group will continue to work closely with a range of key stakeholders to achieve its strategic objectives. These include:

- Kent County Council;
- District and Borough Councils;
- Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce;
- Other business representative groups and networks;
- Local employers;
- Third sector organisations;
- Government departments;
- Local MPs.

As a member of Kent Further Education (KFE), we work closely with Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce and the other two FE Colleges in Kent and Medway (MidKent College and North Kent College) to drive forward the LSIP agenda. As our previous Accountability Agreements have highlighted, this work builds on a strong base of success in securing investment and

implementing Local Skills Improvement Fund projects. This includes our Assistive Technology demonstration spaces EKC Broadstairs College, EKC Canterbury College, and EKC Folkestone College, which are enabling students to learn and apply these technologies to support Care service users in a range of settings.

The KFE partnership, led by North Kent College, has been successful in bidding to establish a Construction Technical Excellence College (CTEC) for the South East region. The CTEC will work closely with colleges, employers, and other stakeholders across the region to meet the needs of the sector, including growth in provision, development of new curriculum, increasing teaching capacity, and sharing resources and good practice.

We have worked collaboratively with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Kent County Council, KFE and other providers to develop a new programme, Thrive, that directly responds to Connect to Work (and wider Get Britain Working implementation) and the Kent and Medway Work and Health Strategy. This programme is designed specifically for adults with long-term health conditions to help them return to work or support their personal development. A successful pilot has been delivered in Thanet and Swale, and has now been rolled out in Canterbury and Dover. Our new co-designed EMPOWER programme, to address long term worklessness, is currently being piloted in Folkestone.

This annual accountability agreement also takes account of our response to wider policy, including devolution. We are working closely with local authorities to ensure that the planned local government reorganisation meets the needs of our communities.

Engagement with other providers in the area

EKC Group collaborates closely with the other two General Further Education Colleges in Kent and Medway, North Kent College and MidKent College. All three institutions are members of KFE, which is a pro-active partnership of FE Colleges that acts as a voice for the county's Further Education sector and to ensure it delivers the skills and training required. In addition to the LSIF, there are a range of collaborative projects and events, including staff conferences and skills competitions.

EKC Group also works with other providers in the area, including:

Schools – a selective education system operates in East Kent and every school has a sixth form, which has created a highly competitive environment. This system reduces schools' willingness to collaborate, however where possible we do work with schools, supporting them with the implementation of provider access legislation. This has included providing technical and vocational taster sessions and learning opportunities for pre-16s, as well as working with them to successfully transition learners into College.

Universities – we work in partnership with the Kent and Medway universities on key initiatives, including the LSIP, and to meet the needs of key sectors such as Health through co-designed progression pathways and a joined-up approach to curriculum.

Independent Training Providers (ITPs) – Whilst the Group does not currently subcontract, we have strategic partnerships with ITPs to meet local needs. For example we have established a partnership with Runway Training, which includes developing a complementary adult offer, a co-ordinated offer to better meet the needs of the Health and Social Care sector, and joint CPD. We continue to work with independent training providers through the LSIP, including through membership of a Solutions Panel to identify areas of joint working and gaps in provision.

4. Contribution to national, regional and local priorities

Aims and objectives	KPIs / Outcomes	EKC Group Strategic Goal Ref
1. Deliver 16-19 study programmes and T Levels to meet local needs, equipping our students with skills for life and work	• Increase 16-19 students from 7,722 in 2025/26 to 8,121 in 2026/27, including 854 T Levels in priority sectors • Increase positive student destinations from 90% to 92% • To have implemented a regional pilot for transition and attendance support for vulnerable 16–19 learners at risk of becoming NEET in partnership with feeder schools • Equip our students with core skills through: o Social action o Work experience o Digital skills (including AI) o Critical thinking o Participation in skills competitions o Sustainability programmes o Innovation and entrepreneurship programmes	Goals 1 and 2
2. Develop an improved offer for individuals that enables them to access the learning and skills they need to enhance their lives, and that meets the needs of our local communities	• Deliver an increase of 40 new courses to 360 adults in 2026/27 in national and LSIP priority sectors, including Digital, Construction and the Built Environment and Adult Social Care • 80% of provision will be focused on priority sectors and identified cross-cutting themes (from a 2025/26 baseline of 78%) • Work with DWP to co-design and deliver innovative place-based programmes. These will support 120 individuals who are unemployed or on low incomes to develop confidence and new	Goal 1

Aims and objectives	KPIs / Outcomes	EKC Group Strategic Goal Ref

	skills to progress towards and / or enter employment or volunteering
	• Work closely with partners to support 16-25 year-olds with 4 additional community-based programmes and provision
	• Building on our existing highly inclusive provision, utilise the new Inclusive Mainstream Fund to:
	  ○ develop an enhanced SEND curriculum and support offer
	  ○ invest in staff training to equip them with the latest strategies to support the increasing diversity of support needs	

3. Develop and deliver a range of exceptional business support and training solutions	• Ensure that more than 60% of Apprenticeship starts are 16-18 year-olds • Deliver 446 Apprenticeship starts to support employers across East Kent • Deliver two new Apprenticeships Units in 2026/27 (EV installation and Solar) from the first wave made available • Develop and deliver 2 additional courses (from a baseline of 3) that support digital skills needs that cut across all sectors, including Artificial Intelligence and Cybersecurity. • Our Innovation Kitchen is utilised by local food businesses for new product development and production, achieving a 60% occupancy rate throughout the year • Support local businesses across East Kent to utilise the Growth and Skills levy for Apprenticeships units	Goal 3
4. Further develop our place-based strategic work, in partnership with public sector partners to meet local needs	• Work with Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce and other KFE Colleges to support LSIP 2.0 priorities • Through our existing Memoranda of Understanding, co-design, develop and deliver bespoke training programmes with our public sector partners to meet their workforce and skills needs, supporting their staff through structural reorganisations	Goals 1 and 3

5. Local needs duty

EKC Group operates a Committee and Local Board structure that received a Beacon Award for Excellence in Governance in 2024. Through its Local Board and Education Committee structure, the governing body regularly reviews how well local needs are being met. EKC Group also received a 'Strong' judgement from Ofsted for meeting skills needs at its last inspection.

An assessment of how well the Group met local needs was undertaken as part of the development of its Strategic Plan 2025-29. As mentioned in section 3 above, the Group also works closely with other key stakeholders to review local needs and how these can be met collaboratively.

Through this comprehensive system of review, a range of new or continuing strategic actions will be implemented, including:

- A new Strategic Plan for 2025-29. This includes specific objectives to better meet local needs, including:
    - The further development of curriculum specialisms to meet the needs of priority sectors
    - Developing an improved offer for adults, enhancing life choices, supporting health, wellbeing, employability and progression in work
    - Developing a distinctive and relevant Higher Education offer
    - Enabling enhanced progression routes on the Isle of Sheppey to enable more young people to study locally in a relevant industry sector
    - Further embedding life critical skills into our study programmes, including digital / AI, employability, entrepreneurship, innovation and sustainability
    - Ensuring that employers are at the heart of curriculum design, development and delivery
    - Developing and delivering an innovation offer to support our businesses
    - Developing an improved and easily understood offer to business

- A new Property Strategy to:
    - Ensure that the Group builds on the significant investment already made in delivering a modern, sustainable estate, with curriculum facilities that support local specialisms
    - Provide additional capacity at Ashford College to meet the sustained demographic growth of young people
- Continuing to ensure that local stakeholders are represented on our Local Boards to support and challenge our Colleges and EKC Training to meet local needs

- Continuing to work closely with Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce, MidKent College, North Kent College and other providers to meet the needs identified in the LSIP
- Working in partnership with DWP, NHS, Local Authorities, Colleges, Providers, and other key stakeholders on joint policy implementation, place-making, and other initiatives, including Connect to Work (and wider Get Britain Working implementation) and the Kent and Medway Work and Health Strategy
- Working closely with other providers and stakeholders to support any major inward investment and infrastructure projects, for example the Lower Thames Crossing
- Continuing to work with our key employers to deliver against shared objectives, reflected in memoranda of understanding
- Seeking to work collaboratively with Kent County Council to meet the needs of SEND learners

6. Corporation Statement

On behalf of the EKC Group corporation, it is hereby confirmed that this document reflects an agreed statement of purpose, aims and objectives, and fulfils the statutory Local Needs Duty, as approved by the corporation on 13th July 2026.

Charles Buchanan



Chair of Governors

Lucy McLeod



Chief Executive Officer

7. Relevant Supporting Documentation

Kent and Medway Workforce Skills Evidence Base

LSIP

KCC SEND Sufficiency Plan

EKC Group Strategic Plan

EKC Group Curriculum 2030 Research

EKC Group Financial Statements

EKC Group Ofsted Inspection Reports

Pathways for All – Kent 16 to 19 Review

Levelling Up Fund projects - Margate Digital, Sheerness Revival, Dover Beacon, Ashford Film Studios

Appendix: Progress update on 2025/26 aims and objectives

Aims and objectives	KPIs / Outcomes	Progress Update
1. Deliver 16-19 study programmes and T Levels to meet local needs, equipping our students with skills for life and work, enabling them to progress to further learning or careers	• Increase 16-19 students from 7,249 in 2024/25 to 7,367 in 2025/26	We have recruited 7,722 students (355 above our allocation)
	• Increase positive student destinations from 90% to 92%	This is not reportable for 2025/26 until December 2026. Positive student destinations in 2024/25 were 92.2%
	• Increase the number of T Level students by 146 in 2025/26	There has been an increase of 41 T Level students in 2025/26 (729 -vs- 688 in 2024/25). The under recruitment is primarily due to a national pause in the defunding of some Level 3 programmes, predominantly Electrical and Plumbing, which has created uncertainty across the sector.
	• Equip our students with core skills through: a. Social action b. Work experience c. Critical digital skills (including AI) d. Participation in skills competitions e. Sustainability programmes f. Innovation and entrepreneurship programmes	These core skills are an entitlement for all students, supported by our curriculum blueprint which tightly defines our study programme offer. Delivery in 2025/26 includes: • Equipping our students with critical life skills in personal finance, self-employment, digital and AI, sustainability, and study skills • Working in partnership with our KFE College partners to deliver skills competitions for our students across all industry sectors • Work experience, industry placements, and work related activities, working closely with our employer partners

Aims and objectives	KPIs / Outcomes	Progress Update
		• Two Community Weeks, with a range of student-led social action projects.
2. Develop an improved offer for adults that enables them to access the learning and skills they need to enhance their lives, and that meets the needs of our local communities	Deliver an increase of 40 new courses to 360 adults in 2025/26 in national and LSIP priority sectors, including Computing, Construction and the Built Environment and Health and Social Care.	55 new courses were established for 2025/26 for 496 adults in a range of LSIP priority sectors, including: • Trades, sustainability and retrofit programmes • Construction project and contract management • Increased engineering programmes across all levels • Short courses including technology adoption and deployment, computer-aided design, digital automation and robotics • The Food and Drink Compliance Passport • A range of specific skills programmes including understanding mental health first aid and mental health advocacy in the workplace; personal care needs; end-of-life care and dementia • Assistive Technology and Digital Skills for Health and Care • Short courses including using AI for business, cyber security, and wider use of data analytics • Development of design related digital courses • Digital literacy and IT user courses for Microsoft Office
	72% of provision will be focused on priority sectors and identified cross-cutting themes (from a baseline of 67%)	78% of provision in 2025/26 is focused on priority sectors and cross-cutting themes
	Pilot a new programme supporting adults with long-	• 8 programmes have been delivered for those with long-term health

Aims and objectives	KPIs / Outcomes	Progress Update
	term health conditions explore career and work options in Swale and Thanet working with 60 learners.	conditions in Thanet, Swale, Canterbury and Dover, with a total of 83 students benefitting. • As part of the Get Kent and Medway Working Strategy EKC Group have led a Kent and Medway wide co-design programme with DWP, providers and other partners including housing, health and community organisations to develop an additional 12-week programme for the long term workless (those returning from Restart). This has been piloted in Folkestone and will be evaluated before it is rolled out to other areas.
3. Develop and deliver a range of exceptional business support and training solutions, establishing long-term partnerships with our local employers to enable them to grow and innovate	Continue to ensure that more than 50% of Apprenticeship starts are 16-18 year-olds	55% of starts are 16-18 year-olds (217 out of 393)
	Maintain the number of Apprenticeship starts above 450 (target of 461)	There have been 393 starts which is below target. Starts have been impacted by several factors, including the defunding of some Apprenticeship Standards and by increased staff costs for employers.
	Increase Higher Apprenticeships starts from 25 to 37, including one new programme in the priority sector of Education (Specialist Teaching Assistant Level 5)	50 Higher Apprenticeship starts in 2025/26 in the following Standards: • Operations Manager • Learning and Skills Teacher • Construction Site Supervisor • People Professional
	Develop and deliver 3 new courses that support digital skills needs that cut across all sectors, including Artificial Intelligence,	4 new courses have been developed and delivered: • Two cross-cutting digital courses, relevant to all sectors, will be piloted during May-July 2026

Aims and objectives	KPIs / Outcomes	Progress Update
	Cybersecurity, and other digital skills.	• Level 1 Cybersecurity for adults embedded in empoyability programmes • Cybersecurity T Level
	Utilisation of our Innovation Kitchen by local food businesses for new product development and production leads to 60% occupancy by July 2026.	Utilisation is at 45%. There is a clear three-year plan for increased and sustained utilisation of this asset.
	Support local businesses in the Building Services sector to develop their Green Credentials with the expansion of new programmes to include Retrofit programmes, Air and Ground Source Heat Pumps and Low Temperature Water Systems with a total target of 94 learners.	Retrofit programmes have been delivered to 91 learners.
4. Further develop our place-based strategic work, in partnership with key stakeholders, including supporting LSIP 2.0 priorities, the restructuring of local public services and preparing for devolution	Support the restructuring of local public services (NHS and local government reorganisation)	We have developed and delivered an offer to support the restructuring of the Integrated Care Board, supporting 100 staff. We have Memoranda of Understanding in place with five of our six Districts and Boroughs to support the Local Government Reorganisation process.
	Work with Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce and other KFE Colleges to support LSIP 2.0 priorities, including successful securing any LSIF funding opportunities.	We have worked with Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce and other stakeholders to support the development of LSIP 2.0. This was published in July 2026 and our 2026/27 aims and objectives will support the identified priorities.

Aims and objectives	KPIs / Outcomes	Progress Update
		There have been no further LSIF funding opportunities in 2025/26.
	Through our existing Memoranda of Understanding, co-design, develop and deliver bespoke training programmes for each of our six district and borough councils and East Kent Healthcare Partnership to meet their workforce and skills needs, supporting their staff through structural reorganisations	We have developed and delivered an offer to support the restructuring of the Integrated Care Board into NHS England, supporting 100 staff. We have Memoranda of Understanding in place with five of our six Districts and Boroughs to support the Local Government Reorganisation process.