



# **Eastbourne Economic Strategy Consultation Summary Report 2025-2035**

**By:**

**Marshall Regen Ltd**

**for**

**Eastbourne Neighbourhood Board**

**and**

**Eastbourne Borough Council**

**August 2025**

## 1. Introduction

To help inform the Eastbourne Economic Strategy and Action Plan (2025 – 2035), additional resources were committed by the Eastbourne Neighbourhood Board to undertake a programme of consultation and engagement with key stakeholders.

This report summarises the insights provided by those consulted and highlights common priorities, challenges, and opportunities to help inform the development of the Economic Strategy and Action Plan.

A list of key stakeholder and partners was agreed with the client team at Eastbourne Borough Council (EBC) and the dates they were invited to participate and consulted is set out in the table below<sup>1</sup>:

Regeneration Project Manager at EBC	<a href="mailto:Kerry.Barrett@lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk">Kerry.Barrett@lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk</a> 19 June @ 10am
Assistant Director: Housing, Assets and Development at EBC	<a href="mailto:Nathan.Haffenden@lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk">Nathan.Haffenden@lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk</a> 17 June @ 11am
Economic Development Manager at ESCC	<a href="mailto:Katy.Thomas@eastsussex.gov.uk">Katy.Thomas@eastsussex.gov.uk</a> Written feedback submitted
Team Manager - Culture and Tourism at ESCC	<a href="mailto:Sally.Staples@eastsussex.gov.uk">Sally.Staples@eastsussex.gov.uk</a> Written feedback submitted
Team Manager - Infrastructure, Planning and Place at ESCC	<a href="mailto:Jon.Wheeler@eastsussex.gov.uk">Jon.Wheeler@eastsussex.gov.uk</a> Written feedback submitted
Operations Manager – Eastbourne BID	<a href="mailto:luke@youreastbournebid.com">luke@youreastbournebid.com</a> 1 July @ 11am
CEO at Eastbourne Chamber of Commerce	<a href="mailto:christina@eastbournechamber.co.uk">christina@eastbournechamber.co.uk</a> Attended the Neighbourhood Board and Members workshops
Director and CEO at Towner	<a href="mailto:joe.hill@townereastbourne.org.uk">joe.hill@townereastbourne.org.uk</a> 13 August @ 2pm
Managing Director at Edwards	<a href="mailto:Ed.Neuss@edwardsvacuum.com">Ed.Neuss@edwardsvacuum.com</a> 19 June @ 3pm
Tourism Manager at EBC	<a href="mailto:Jack.Brownell@lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk">Jack.Brownell@lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk</a> 9 June @ 2pm
Regeneration Officer at EBC	<a href="mailto:Sara.Taylor@lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk">Sara.Taylor@lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk</a> 4 June @ 10am
Executive Board Member at Eastbourne Hoteliers Association	<a href="mailto:catherine@eastbournehospitality.com">catherine@eastbournehospitality.com</a> 7 June @ 12.15
Strategic Lead at East Sussex College Group	<a href="mailto:nick.backstrom@escg.ac.uk">nick.backstrom@escg.ac.uk</a> 6 June @ 1.30pm
Managing Director at Premier Marinas - Pete Bradshaw	<a href="mailto:pete.bradshaw@premiermarinas.com">pete.bradshaw@premiermarinas.com</a> Awaiting reply
Trafalgar Theatres	Awaiting reply
Managing Director at Sussex Commercial	<a href="mailto:simon@huntcommercial.co.uk">simon@huntcommercial.co.uk</a> 4 July @ 9.30am
The Beacon	<a href="mailto:Greg.westover@lgim.com">Greg.westover@lgim.com</a> ; <a href="mailto:Nicholas.elvidge@lgim.com">Nicholas.elvidge@lgim.com</a> Awaiting reply

<sup>1</sup> No responses were received from Premier Marinas, the Beacon and Trafalgar Theatres to take part in discussions.

A topic guide and background papers were prepared in advance of the one-to-one consultation meetings which sought participants' key views on:

- Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) to the Eastbourne economy.
- Economic challenges.
- Economic Ambition statement.
- Priorities for Action.

From these a number of cross cutting themes have emerged (see section 6) to inform the Economic Strategy and Action Plan.

In addition to the one-to-one meetings and written feedback received from East Sussex County Council, two workshops were organised with:

- Members of Eastbourne Neighbourhood Board on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2025
- Eastbourne Borough Council Elected Members on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2025

Alongside the development of the Economic Strategy and Action Plan, the Eastbourne Neighbourhood Board undertook a survey of local businesses – see Addendum at Annex A.

## 2. SWOT - Stakeholder Contributions

In broad terms, consultees felt that the SWOT provided a good summary of the issues and challenges facing the borough. Additional comments and priorities included:

- Strengths
  - Town centre performing well, which has experienced significant public investment (e.g., Victoria Place).
  - Well established visitor economy, including year-round cultural events and rich cultural offer.
  - Well-networked business community.
  - Largest town in East Sussex by population and jobs, drawn from a broad catchment area.
  - Strong local community and voluntary organisations, such as People Matter, and events like Eastbourne Carnival.
  - Eastbourne DigiFest, organised by Chalk Eastbourne.
  - Successful Eastbourne Education Business Partnership.
- Weaknesses
  - Lack of large employers.
  - Low income levels and lack of quality job opportunities to retain young people and families.

- Decline in nighttime economy.
- Visitor economy not fully recovered post-COVID.
- Town centre aesthetic issues and site ownership constraints with no strategic unlocking mechanism.
- Underused conference and cultural facilities (Devonshire Quarter).
- Poor-quality industrial units and weak industrial image.
- Low skill levels: fewer than 40% of adults hold Level 4 qualifications; low Level 3 attainment among 19-year-olds.
- High economic inactivity, especially among older workers, carers, and disabled residents.
- Poor connectivity: slow rail services, congested roads (A27/A259), and weak cycling infrastructure.
- Lack of a local higher education presence following the University of Brighton closure.
- Impact of climate change including coastal flood risks.
- Reputation issues affecting public agencies (EBC and ESCC) amid shrinking financial resources.

- Opportunities

- Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).
- £20m Plan for Neighbourhood funding (and the opportunity for the Neighbourhood Board to consider innovative governance and delivery options).
- Potential Seafront Business Improvement District (BID), currently led by the Eastbourne Hospitality Association.
- Promotion of live/work lifestyles.
- Greater involvement of local businesses in economic planning.
- Developing a sustainable pipeline of engineering talent.
- Coordinated action to support high-value tourism growth:
  - Capitalising on wine tourism, cultural tourism, and the new national King Charles III coastal path.
  - Rebranding Eastbourne beyond the “town for old people” image and focusing on international market (e.g. Far East markets).
  - Enhancing the nighttime offer.
  - Collaboration with Trafalgar Theatres to bolster Meetings, Incentives, Conference and Events sub-sector.
- Investment in high-speed rail, buses, public realm, and strategic roads through LTP4.
- Establishing centres of excellence in digital/creative, health, and construction skills.
- Redeveloping seafront assets, utilising Sovereign Centre opportunities.
- Repurposing large vacant retail units (e.g., Debenhams, TJ Hughes).
- Attracting funding from Homes England and MHCLG.
- Potential for BID/Chamber of Commerce to develop a business welcome pack and highlight key networking opportunities.
- Continuing growth of DigiFest

- Tap into University of Sussex strengths re: Artificial Intelligence (AI).
- Supporting existing businesses to survive and expand.
- Wider Sussex and Brighton Mayoral Combined County Authority could help deliver new homes and jobs for local people.
- Threats:
  - Risks related to mismanagement of LGR.
  - Disconnect between local need and opportunities and sub-regional unitary authority
  - Continued youth outmigration.
  - Stagnation of the visitor economy.
  - Climate change and rising sea-levels
  - Waste water utilities for new housing developments.
  - Negative perceptions of Eastbourne (e.g., suicide hotspot) deterring inward investment.

### 3. Economic Challenges Feedback

Consultees comments on the key economic challenges facing Eastbourne included:

- Need to invest in local visitor economy, specifically activities and attractions.
- Limited local infrastructure to support a growing population.
- Slow progress in addressing climate change and net zero ambitions.
- Town centre lacking vibrancy and nighttime economy (which increasingly doesn't feel safe at night).
- Providing a skills pipeline for new technologies (e.g. AI).
- Land constraints and low commercial viability.
- Lack of Grade A offices and modern industrial space.
- Need to create investment-ready project pipelines and business cases.
- Tap into traffic from attractions like Black Robin Farm to boost town centre visits.

### 4. Economic Priorities Views

Consultees comments on the key economic priorities for Eastbourne included:

- Improve A27 connectivity.
- Diversify the economic base.
- Invest in seafront infrastructure.
- Support AI education for businesses.
- Realising the potential of the seafront and seafront assets and 'connect' effectively to the town centre.
- Create investment-ready project pipelines.

- Boost visitor economy through strategic interventions to attract more visitors to stay and spend in the local economy.

## 5. Economic Ambition Statement Comments

Consultees comments on the draft Economic Ambition statement included:

- Make the ambition more unique to Eastbourne.
- A need to define 'greener, fairer, inclusive' in the main strategy.
- Could the first para of the ambition also refer to supporting exiting businesses?
- Consider "Regenerative" or "Sustainable" rather than "Green" - unclear what Green means in this context?
- Swap "delivers" for "Supports" or "Enables"?
- Refine the number of priorities (content is fine).
- Change the priority for action re skills to: high aspirations and skills levels.

## 6. Emerging Cross-Cutting Themes

A summary of the consultation feedback cross cutting themes include:

### *Skills and Education:*

- Critical shortage of local skills provision.
- Lack of A-level and engineering education within the borough.
- Concern over the closure of University of Brighton campus.

### *Transport and Connectivity:*

- Widespread concern about A27 congestion and limited access.

### *Seafront and Town Centre Regeneration:*

- Strong consensus on the need for a strategic and coordinated approach to investing in seafront and other key public sector assets.

### *Economic Diversification:*

- Reduce reliance on tourism.
- Diversify the economic base.
- Attract and retain younger professionals and entrepreneurs.

### **Public-Private Collaboration:**

- Strong appetite for joint working under a shared 'Brand Eastbourne' vision, particularly in the context of Local Government Reorganisation.

## **7. Strategy Development Considerations**

In developing the Economic Strategy, consultees provided the following views:

- Develop a shared Brand Eastbourne identity.
- Build a long-term seafront investment plan integrated with economic goals.
- Create a skills and talent development strategy, aligned with local industry needs.
- Unlock underused sites through the creative use of policy levers and public-private intervention.
- Develop an infrastructure investment case for A27 improvements (\*).
- Establish a business-led advisory group to engage key employers.

(\*) Author's note: improvements to the A27 Lewes to Polegate are included in the Road Investment Strategy 4. The scheme is also included in the recommended interventions in the Transport for the South East (TfSE) Strategic Investment Plan (SIP) and the East Sussex Local Transport Plan 2024 to 2050 (LTP4) Investment Plan.

## **8. Priorities for Future Action**

In developing the Action Plan, consultees provided the following views:

- **Cultural investment:** Build on the £54 million investment in the Devonshire Quarter; support Sussex Film Office; establish Creative Opportunity Zone.
- **Reputation building:** Address negative narratives (e.g., suicide spot image); promote cultural vibrancy and diversity.
- **Skills and Education:** Support FE relocation to town centre; build on Skills East Sussex infrastructure; link to "Get Sussex Working Plan".
- **Transport and Infrastructure:** Align with LTP4 priorities — including public realm, rail, roads, and cycling/walking improvements.
- **Sustainability and heritage:** Protect and promote chalk downlands and natural assets.

## **9. Impacts of Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

Some consultees were keen for further insights to be considered into potential strategies for maximising AI's benefits in Eastbourne for its business and residents. These are summarised below:

- **Investment in Digital Infrastructure:** Expanding high-speed internet access and supporting affordable device ownership will be key to AI adoption.
- **Skills and Training:** Tailoring education and training programmes to include digital literacy, data science, and AI literacy for businesses and adult learners.
- **Business Support:** Establishing incubators, grants, and mentorships to help SMEs experiment with and implement AI across sectors.
- **Collaboration:** Partnering with UoS and UoB, tech companies, and regional innovation hubs to attract expertise and investment into Eastbourne.
- **Community Engagement:** Developing local policies on data use, privacy, and AI governance to protect residents and build trust. Hosting forums and public consultations to ensure that AI's development aligns with Eastbourne's values and needs.

## 10. Summary

The consultation programme has provided important insights into the borough's economy and highlights the key challenges, themes and priorities to inform the Economic Strategy and policy decisions moving forward.

Although the borough has a number of assets and economic strengths, a significant concern expressed by consultees is the lack of high-value, quality jobs for local people. The spatial constraints, particularly the lack of strategic sites, mean that the focus needs to be on supporting entrepreneurs and existing dynamic businesses building on the fact that Eastbourne offers a positive environment and superb lifestyle in which to start and grow a business.

Addressing an ageing population, retaining young talent and up-skilling local residents to take advantage of new employment opportunities across both traditional and emerging sectors were also highlighted as key challenges.

There is a clear endorsement on the need to grow and develop a higher-value visitor economy, attracting tourists who spend more and stay longer. Revitalising and improving the attractiveness of the seafront was seen as being a high priority for many consultees.

Overall, there was a clear call for proactive and dynamic interventions, balancing ambition with practical, accessible and deliverable actions to help realise opportunities and drive local economic growth.

## Addendum

Alongside the development of the Economic Strategy and Action Plan, the Eastbourne Neighbourhood Board undertook a survey of local businesses. The survey sought to map local businesses operations; identify key challenges, including recruitment, facing local businesses; and seek their views on the priorities for the allocation of the £20 million Plan for Neighbourhood funding.

As of August 2025, 71 businesses completed the survey and the top priorities identified for the Neighbourhood Board's investment were:

- The Seafront
- Improved town centre facilities and safety
- Marketing and promotion of year-round tourism
- Travel, public transport and parking
- Infrastructure investment / commercial premises / development
- Influencing local and regional economic policy
- Business growth grants / enterprise initiatives