
Rochester Riverway

FINDING ITS WAY

What's driving the economic boom in Medway? **Alex Bell** reports

"There's no question in my mind that business actually gets it," the outgoing leader of Medway Council, councillor Alan Jarrett, told *Insider* before stepping down in May. "Medway is a place where they can locate and relocate to because it works well for them," he said.

"We are trying to make it as attractive as possible and have a stream of talent coming through from the universities."

The students, more than 10,000 of them, stem from a unique partnership between the universities of Kent, Greenwich and Canterbury Christ Church. They share a campus at Chatham Maritime.

Jarrett wants to see the talent retained to further bolster Medway's growing economy, a place that is the largest urban area in the South East outside of London and one that boasts the most sizable regeneration zone in the Thames Gateway. "I've always said we have more than 10,000 students in Medway and wouldn't it be great if we could retain more of those," he says.

"To do that we have to provide the right environment, the right working opportunities and that's why we're so determined to have the right type of employment."

BAE Systems, Medway's largest private sector employer, has ambitious plans for further investment in Rochester. Over the next five years, the global company is looking to grow staff numbers from the 1,400 currently based at its Medway site to 2,000. Other major businesses invested in Medway include Dovetail Games, Veetee Rice, Copper Rivet Distillery and Juice Executive.

Global life safety company Hochiki Europe gave a vote of confidence in its 30th anniversary year since establishing operations in Medway. The company invested £5.5m in a new facility on a 1.92 acre site as part of the strategic expansion of its European arm. The 24,000 sq ft building will bring new employment opportunities, adding to the 180 staff already based at its nearby European headquarters and research and development centre in Gillingham.

Nathan Hudson, sales and marketing director at Hochiki Europe, says: "The business has been growing rapidly for the last ten to 15 years. We're operating in the UK, Europe, the Middle East and India. All of those locations are growing in turnover and we need more capacity. We've got to the point where we've outgrown the site on Gillingham Business Park. The new facility will ultimately be our warehousing and distribution area which will allow us to expand with more production at the current site.

"We feed a lot of mouths here in Medway and there's no reason for us to walk away after 30 years and that's why we've reinvested because we believe in our people and a strong workforce that's been very loyal to us, which is really important. In terms of Medway, there's a good motorway network here and we have easy access to Europe. We will also be detailing future investment plans over the next 12 months once we've moved the warehouse operation from the current site to the new facility."

Innovation Park Medway

Acting as a strategic gateway economic hub centred around Rochester Airport, Innovation Park Medway (IPM) sits within the North Kent Enterprise Zone (NKEZ).

As a promoter of innovation, IPM will offer up to 1 million sq ft of commercial space.

"Ultimately," says Jarrett, "we will bring forward up to 3,000 high-quality jobs to IPM. The southern site is ahead in terms of construction and groundworks, we have two tenants agreed and we'll be starting on the buildings very soon. The northern site is much larger and we could probably have allocated the southern side and half the northern side by now with whoever came along and wanted space, including warehousing. But we're absolutely fixated on the maximum number of jobs for the footprint. And we need those jobs to be real high-value jobs."

Jarrett wants to see high technology value, advanced manufacturing, engineering and business knowledge-intensive at IPM. "We have to hold firm to our principles and make sure IPM delivers what we want," he adds. "And one of the important things to consider as well is the juxtaposition with BAE Systems. Wouldn't it be great if over time, we start seeing some of the BAE systems supply chain just over the fence from their clients?"

From shockwaves to transformation

Next year sees the 40th anniversary of the closure of the Chatham Dockyard, which sent a seismic shockwave through the Medway economy. It also ended a century-long connection with the Royal Navy.

"The transformation of Chatham Dockyards is amazing," says Jarrett. "It continues to attract high-quality businesses to the site as well as residential. It's just astonishing what's been done and shows that if you have a team of people with a very clear vision and a determination to deliver, you can do amazing things. The area is now a sought-after filming location for major movies and TV series and one of the businesses based there, Dovetail Games, is a big player in the video games world."

The bedrock of Medway's economy, says Jarrett, is its 14,000-plus SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises). An important place for a multitude of small, independent shops and eateries is The Old High Street Intra, which boasts art galleries, art centres, a theatre and frequent live music gigs.

The Star Hill to Sun Pier Conservation area contains 34 historical assets including listed buildings throughout and is considered a designated heritage asset. The Old High Street Intra has also been awarded £1.6m High Street Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) funding from Historic England to support regeneration projects in the area. A programme of cultural events and heritage restoration projects is under way and planned to take place up until 2024.

Jody Smeed runs Poco Loco on the High Street, and says: "The Old High Street Intra became a very forgotten area. What's come out of the HSHAZ initiative is that a lot of us who were just busy scurrying along in our own rat race got to know each other and we realised how many great independent businesses and artistic people we had along the high street." ■


Chatham Waterfront

THE MOUTH OF THE MEDWAY WATERFRONT

Chatham Waters, part of Peel L&P's strategic waters project, includes the regeneration of a 26-acre former historic naval dockyard. Residential, commercial, retail and educational spaces have already been delivered, with £150m invested and 850 full-time jobs created.

James Whittaker, executive director of development at Peel L&P, tells *Insider* what's next. "Once we've finished Chatham Waters in three years' time, we will move on to the remaining Chatham Docks industrial estate, where there's 90 acres of land. We are promoting 1 million sq ft of employment space and 2,500 residential units but that has got to be worked through the local planning system. We are also planning to build an events space. An 85-bed elderly care home will be delivered by Montpelier Estates and should be on site this summer, with a two-year build period.

"Outline planning permission to deliver 400 more homes has been extended by three years and there will also be a multi-storey car park behind Asda."

Whittaker says delivering affordable homes is also a priority.

"We've worked with Legal & General's housing association arm to deliver two towers which we will be topping out soon. There will be 237 apartments, 60 per cent of them shared ownership and a true affordable housing model that should be copied elsewhere. The first tower should be completed by December and the next by April 2024."

Already delivered is the University Technical College, which opened in September 2015, providing skills and education for 600 students in engineering, construction and design.

A 73,000 sq ft Asda superstore and petrol station opened in September 2015 while family pub and restaurant The Mast & Rigging started trading in March 2018. The X1 residential development boasts 199 apartments which have all been sold and a build-to-rent 193 apartment scheme forward-funded by Long Harbour has also been hailed a success.