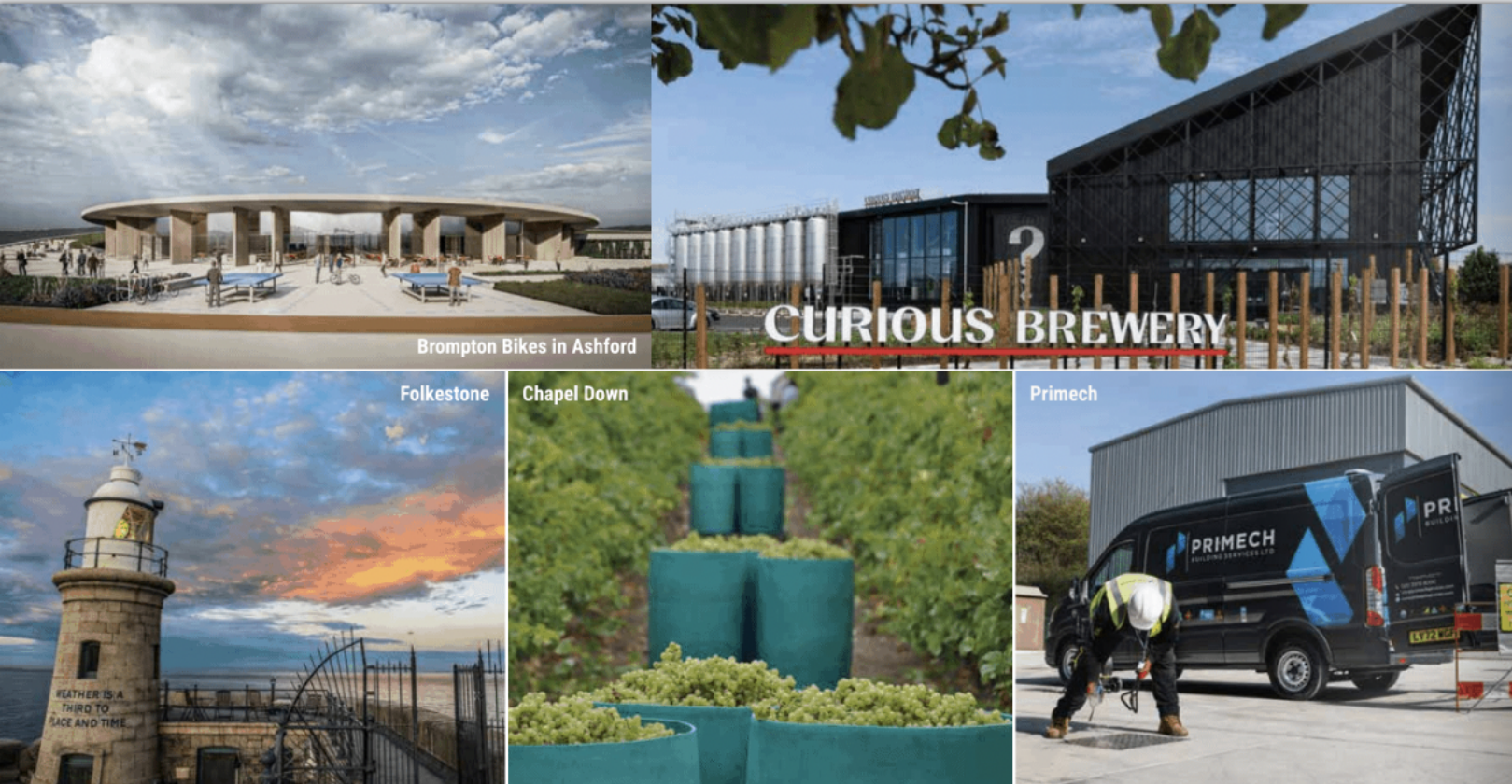




Brompton Bikes in Ashford

Folkestone

Chapel Down

Primech

'A LAND OF OPPORTUNITY AND REGENERATION'

Through Sevenoaks, Maidstone, Ashford, before ending on the Folkestone coast, **Alex Bell** investigates the draw of the Kent Channel Corridor

Among the sectors where Kent's future job prospects will emerge are methods of food production, evolving communication technologies, life science R&D, advanced manufacturing and green energy. That's according to the chief executive for Locate in Kent, Nick Fenton.

Examining the Kent Channel Corridor (KCC) specifically, it's clear that progress is plentiful. New enterprise clusters abound, from the legal services and commuter belt around Sevenoaks, to logistics parks and a growing new science community in Maidstone; from film studio-led regeneration in Ashford to sustainable development at Otterpool Park garden town – and more.

Fenton, formerly area managing director with Wimpey Homes, says: "County wide there are projects being delivered that will be pivotal to the success of the new government's growth ambitions given the region's strategically important location for the UK as the gateway between London and Europe."

"The county already attracts the highest number of overseas investment projects for the South East outside the capital, but could play an even bigger role in attracting more business investment and delivering for the

UK. That includes future private and public investment to deliver sustainable garden communities, improve access to the Channel ports and fulfil the region's full potential as an extension of the UK's 'Golden Triangle' of London, Oxford and Cambridge."

Key corridor activity

Kent is indeed becoming seen as an extension of the triangle, with 58,500 (July 2023) employed in this sector across the county.

Maidstone Innovation Centre (MIC) at Kent Medical Campus is the latest science facility in Kent's science cluster. Off junction seven of the M20, MIC provides space for businesses operating in the med-tech, life science and healthcare sectors. Tenants

include Michelson Diagnostics and XT Biomed.

The Folkestone & Hythe district is home to a growing creative community including Hollaway Studio, the architectural practice behind the proposed new sustainable factory and headquarters on stilts for Brompton bikes in Ashford.

Sevenoaks has linked up with Tonbridge and Malling Council and Tunbridge Wells Council to drive more investment to west Kent in emerging sector clusters including creative, distribution, financial, healthcare, ICT, real estate, tourism and hospitality and wine and agri-tech. Meanwhile, phase two of the major LOC8 logistics park off junction 8 of the M20 at Maidstone, by Clearbell, will soon be ready to occupy.

Unit 6A is the last opportunity at Panattoni Park Aylesford, one of the largest industrial logistics developments in the South East. The 90-acre, 1.6 million sq ft logistics park, connects to junction 4 of the M20, enabling fast access to central London and Dover.

Panattoni Park



Ashford College



Ashford Designer Outlet



Spotlight on Ashford

Ashford Borough Council (ABC) has just set out a fresh four year focus entitled 'Our Plan for the Borough – 2024-2028'. Planet, people and place are the three pillars of the plan.

Tom Jenkins, ABC economic development manager, tells *Insider*: "Ashford is the largest borough in Kent, it's very strategically placed for business, and in particular for connectivity, with high speed one taking you to London St Pancras in 38 minutes."

"Three junctions at the moment onto the M20 take you straight down to Dover and Folkestone, with access to Europe pretty much on the doorstep. There's the new inland border facility as well now at Ashford. The house prices are about a third cheaper than London and there are 46 acres of open space."

To add to Jenkins' take, Ashford has so far landed £14.7m levelling-up funding and currently boasts the largest cluster of food and drink enterprises in Kent, at 410.

Chapel Down is England's leading wine producer based in Tenterden but with plans in place to build a major new winery and production facility near Canterbury to support future growth.

Other award-winning wine producers in Ashford include the Gusbourne Estate which has 60 hectares of vineyards in Appledore.

Work has also begun on preparing the former Victorian railway works site in Ashford for a multimillion development that will include TV/film studios and a 120-bedroom hotel. Developers are working closely with EKC Group on a film school for Ashford with additional space for offices and co-working aimed at creative companies.

Jenkins adds: "AshfordFor is the inward investment campaign for ABC and it details why Ashford is a good place to invest, work and live."

"There are 53 good and outstanding primary and secondary schools here. Another key highlight is the South Ashford Garden Community, which has 7,000 homes being built to the south of Ashford town, all built on the principles of garden cities."

Need for national recognition

Between April 2019 and July 2023, Locate in Kent says that it supported more than 330 business investment projects in the Kent and Medway area, overseeing 9,427 jobs created, with 4,139 jobs from 87 inward investment and major projects (44 per cent being foreign direct investments).

Right now, Locate in Kent's active pipeline contains 67 employers with requirements for industrial space.

"This is a region full of talent and innovation thanks to world leading, research led, industry focused universities, excellent connectivity to London and Europe and a great quality of life," says Fenton.

"We hope the government recognises that potential as it continues to build support from across the regions of the UK for its growth agenda – from delivering vital planning reform to backing investment in major infrastructure projects and promoting the country to markets around the world."

"The new government holds the key to unlocking thousands of jobs and billions of pounds in investment for Kent and Medway if it recognises the region's strategic importance to the UK economy."

Primech growth

A total of 17,620 companies were formed in Kent during 2023, a 9.4 per cent increase on the previous year. The Inform Direct Review of Company Formations report said it made

the county one of the most successful for startups in the UK.

With 133,898 companies said to now be registered in Kent, the county's entrepreneurs can surely be proud.

Declan Ausher is one such entrepreneur, having rebranded IHS Gas & Plumbing Ltd as Primech Building Services in 2019.

Primech delivers end-to-end mechanical and engineering solutions to the building management and construction sectors.

Maidstone-born Ausher, now 31, leads a team of 82 employees from Primech's Rochester HQ. Several weeks ago his company topped Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce's MegaGrowth 50 table – based on average turnover growth of privately-owned businesses in Kent with a turnover of £1m-plus – with a staggering 739 per cent growth recorded over the past four years.

Ausher says: "Over the last five years we've had quite a structured growth plan, and we seem to be sticking to where we were hoping to hit. One of the primary focuses since I started was people. It's ensuring the ethos of the people and the business feels like a community."

With a base now set up in Luton, and more Primech sites expected, Ausher says: "We've got a work pool throughout the South East. And we are always looking at integrating other great businesses into our brand."

"In Kent there's a lot of opportunity and a lot of up and coming towns, like Ashford for example, which is a phenomenally fast-growing economy."

"The amount of opportunity in both regeneration and new building in Kent is also vastly increasing. Due to the county having such a strong residential offer, inevitably, the population in Kent is going to keep growing. In turn the talent pool will keep growing. So, if you've got a budding business that is developing well, you can be in a good position."