

Report to Cabinet

11 March 2025

West Sussex Economic Strategy 2025-2035

Report by Executive Director of Place Services

Electoral division(s): All

Summary

The report seeks adoption of a new West Sussex Economic Strategy, as part of the County Council's current leadership of strategic economic planning and in accordance with the key decision `Agreements and Governance arrangements for future economic development activity to replace Local Economic Partnership governance ([LDR04 23/24](#)).

The West Sussex Economic Strategy will be a strategic, over-arching document for West Sussex for the period 2025 – 2035. The strategy sets out the national, county, and local context, including economic insight and evidence. It highlights the economic assets and strengths of West Sussex that provide significant opportunities. It identifies a strategic vision to 2035 and five key ambitions within to drive the vision forward. It also sets out how the strategy will be overseen and led, and how it will be monitored and evaluated.

The strategy is consistent with Our Council Plan and supports the priorities of a sustainable and prosperous economy, helping people and communities to fulfil their potential, and making the best use of resources, underpinned by protecting the environment. The West Sussex Economic Strategy will provide the framework for the County Council's economic development interventions. The new strategy aligns with other strategies such as the West Sussex Transport Plan, where appropriate.

Recommendation

The Cabinet is asked to adopt the West Sussex Economic Strategy.

Proposal

1 Background and context

- 1.1 From April 2024 the functions of Local Enterprise Partnerships, including responsibility for strategic economic planning, transferred to Mayoral Combined Authorities and upper tier local authorities, including West Sussex County Council. The County Council is accountable to government for the development of a new West Sussex Economic Strategy.

- 1.2 The Economic Strategy is consistent with Our Council Plan and supports the priorities of a sustainable and prosperous economy, helping people and communities to fulfil their potential, and making the best use of resources, underpinned by protecting the environment. It builds on the [West Sussex Economic Collaboration](#) joint commission between the county, district and borough councils across West Sussex on how we collaborate on economic development, regeneration, and growth.
- 1.3 The strategy is positioned as being for the whole county. It is for public, private, and voluntary sector partners to work together to drive a productive, inclusive, and sustainable economy to make a real difference to residents and businesses.
- 1.4 The strategy will be overseen by the new West Sussex Economic Growth Board (WSEGB) which brings together leaders in business, local government, education, and health.
- 1.5 The strategy will be formally adopted by the County Council. In a change to the previous approach, the County Council will not need to have a separate Economy Strategy or Plan. Instead, the new West Sussex Economic Strategy will provide the framework for the County Council's economic development interventions. The new strategy will also align with other strategies such as the West Sussex Transport Plan, where appropriate.
- 1.6 The Economic Strategy covers the period when changes to local government are expected to take place. The Sussex devolution bid to create a combined Mayoral Authority for Sussex was agreed by Government in February 2025. It will see powers devolved to a mayor who is elected by people in Sussex. Alongside the plans for a Mayor Authority there are separate but related plans for re-organising local authorities.
- 1.7 The Economic Strategy and associated action plan will provide a clear framework for activity in the short to medium term. Importantly the strategy will set out the economic growth agenda for West Sussex which can help inform future arrangements.

2 Proposal details

West Sussex Economic Strategy

- 2.1 The West Sussex Economic Strategy (Appendix A) is a strategic, over-arching document for West Sussex for the period 2025 – 2035. The ten-year time frame is required by the Government.
- 2.2 The strategy draws on economic evidence (Appendix B) and considers the changing national and local strategic context. It highlights the economic assets and strengths of West Sussex that provide significant opportunities.
- 2.3 The strategy identifies an overall vision to 2035 and five key ambitions within to drive the strategy forward. It also sets out how the strategy will be overseen and led, and how it will be monitored and evaluated.
- 2.4 The new West Sussex Economic Strategy will be a partnership strategy, owned by the County Council and endorsed by the WSEGB, and is for use by stakeholders across West Sussex. It considers the economy in broad terms,

recognising the role of transport, infrastructure, the visitor economy, environment, skills, housing, and other areas that contribute to economic growth, but it does not seek to duplicate or replace other strategies.

- 2.5 The overall performance of the West Sussex economy will be tracked during the life of the strategy using high-level indicators and these are included in the draft strategy. These high-level indicators should inform actions, whilst recognising many of the influences on them will be outside the control of local partners.

Action Plan

- 2.6 An action plan will be published, setting out how the strategy's ambitions and priorities will be progressed. The initial action plan setting out the focus in the first year will be made up of:

- Known activities arising from government funding and agreements that align with strategic priorities e.g. [Growth Hub](#), [Careers Hub](#), [Connect to Work](#), [Skills Bootcamps](#)
- Known activities associated with existing commitments that align with strategic priorities e.g. [Sussex visitor economy growth](#), [Local Skills Improvement Plan](#), [Gatwick Airport Economic Zone Taskforce](#), refresh of [Growth Deals](#) between the County Council and the Districts and Boroughs
- New activities to progress agreed strategic priorities, including a focus on key sectors and clusters aligned to the emerging National Industrial Strategy.

- 2.7 The action plan will draw on and supersede the West Sussex Economic collaboration action plan previously endorsed by the West Sussex Leaders' Board. The WSEGB will contribute to and oversee the action plan.

- 2.8 There will be reporting on performance indicators relevant to key activities in the action plan as they come forward. The action plan will be a 'live' document that will adapt and evolve. There will be an annual report to provide a narrative of progress.

3 Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing).

- 3.1 The County Council has carried out the Economic Strategy work in accordance with the assurance framework and funding arrangements agreed with Government. The content was informed through dialogue and engagement.

4 Consultation, engagement, and advice

- 4.1 The Economic Strategy has been informed by extensive engagement as set out below.
- 4.2 **Internal** - the development of the strategy has been informed by engagement with relevant County Council officers including from economic growth, sustainability, energy, planning services, digital infrastructure, and Growth & OPE.

- 4.3 **Partners and key stakeholders** – in 2023, the West Sussex local authorities undertook the economic collaboration work involving stakeholder engagement workshops. In the autumn of 2023, the County Council hosted four economy roundtables on next steps and actions on the main themes of the economic collaboration report, attended by more than 100 people including more than 40 businesses and their representative organisations. The resulting Economic Collaboration High-Level Action Plan was approved by the West Sussex Leaders’ Board. This work, alongside discussions with key partners in the summer of 2024 has informed the draft strategy.
- 4.3.1 In January 2025, formal engagement on the draft strategy took place with 52 partners, stakeholders, and business representatives invited to comment through the ‘Your Voice’ engagement hub. 19 responses were received from Districts and Boroughs, education and training providers, business representatives, and government departments. The engagement helped to ensure the strategy aligns with County Council and stakeholders’ strategy and policy documents.
- 4.3.2 Overall, the feedback was positive, with broad support for the content. Respondents were asked to respond to the question ‘Which of the Economic Strategy’s strategic priorities do you consider would be most transformational in achieving the vision?’. The top 5 scoring were: Grow high value sectors and distinctive clusters and strengthen innovation networks aligned with the national Industrial Strategy; Promote the county as an attractive investment and international trade location; Strengthen collaboration between public and private sectors; Promote opportunities for new development with supporting infrastructure to enable growth; Support the transition to net zero and resilience to climate change. The three lowest scoring strategic priorities were: Improve efficiency and value in sectors with modest or low productivity; Boost the proportion of working age residents; Enable the creation of connected places.
- 4.3.3 Respondents were also invited to provide general feedback. Comments focussed on suggested minor changes which have largely been incorporated. One respondent did suggest more extensive changes to the overall vision and structure, but this feedback has not been followed as no other respondents had similar comments.
- 4.3.4 In addition, respondents were invited to comment on the draft action plan and the feedback will be incorporated into the document.
- 4.4 **Members** - Members of the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee received an informal briefing on the strategy in January. The main feedback was that the draft strategy was well-researched and evidenced, with a clear vision and priorities. Members highlighted key issues and challenges needing attention, including transport connections (particularly east west connections), the need to balance net zero targets with economic growth ambitions, the type and affordability of housing to help attract and retain young people and families, and the future of town centres. The visitor economy was identified as important to the county, as was the role out of digital infrastructure and its adoption by businesses. Members also identified the ageing population as a fundamental challenge for West Sussex, along with a need to upskill residents.

4.4.1 The Committee formally considered the Economic Strategy at the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee meeting in March 2025.

4.5 **WESEGB** – the WSEGB had a discussion on the draft strategy at its introductory meeting in November 2025. Overall, the feedback was positive, with members supporting the ambitions and strategic priorities. The Board particularly highlighted the importance of growing high value sectors and distinctive clusters aligned with the national Industrial Strategy; promoting opportunities for new development with supporting infrastructure; strengthening collaboration; population challenges around the working age population; and enabling an inclusive workforce.

4.5.1 Following wider engagement, the strategy was updated and considered again by the WSEGB at its meeting in February. The feedback from the Board was positive, with consensus around the need to agree initial focus areas to drive forward the strategic priorities and ensure the strategy has ongoing alignment with national developments. The WSEGB endorsed the Economic Strategy.

5 Finance

5.1 There are no direct revenue or capital financial implications for the County Council arising from the Economic Strategy. The strategy will shape the County Council’s strategic priorities, investment decisions and actions in relation to economic development, regeneration, and growth.

5.2 The strategy will provide the framework for leveraging external funding including from the Government which, in 2025/26 is expected to include Connect to Work funding from the Department for Work and Pensions, and Growth Hub funding from the Department for Business and Trade.

5.3 Any new budget allocations (including through external funding bids) to deliver the action plan will be based on sound business cases, value for money, and the likelihood of securing benefits. They will be taken through the usual County Council governance process where required.

6 Risk implications and mitigations

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
Delivery of strategy could be impacted by new national Government policies and announcements.	The strategy has been drafted in alignment with the emerging UK Industrial Strategy. Activities will be reviewed and planned to ensure alignment with other relevant policies and/or announcements.
Future local government arrangements could impact delivery.	We need an economic strategy and action plan in place now to progress immediate priorities and opportunities. The strategy will set out the economic growth agenda for West Sussex to inform future arrangements.

7 Policy alignment and compliance

- 7.1 Our Council Plan – This proposal supports West Sussex residents, businesses and employers and particularly supports the Council plan priorities to develop a ‘Sustainable and prosperous economy’ and ‘Helping people and communities to fulfil their potential’, ‘Making the best use of resources’, underpinned by protecting the environment. The Strategy includes a vision that ‘By 2035, West Sussex will capitalise on its dynamic businesses, excellent international connectivity, and outstanding natural assets to amplify innovation, opportunity, and growth. We will ensure a more productive, inclusive, and sustainable economy’.
- 7.2 Legal implications - The Council does not have statutory and legal responsibilities with respect to producing an Economic Strategy for the county. The Strategy aligns with central government guidance ([Transfer of Local Enterprise Partnership \(LEP\) core functions to combined and local authorities](#)). The Procurement Act 2023 (and its accompanying Regulations) have taken effect. The focus on whole lifecycle contract management and costing, and more flexible procurement processes, will help to support the realisation of the ambitions detailed in the Economic Strategy.
- 7.3 Equality duty and human rights assessment – The West Sussex Economic Strategy will comply with the Councils’ policies. As a high-level document, the West Sussex Economic Strategy has been designed to benefit the county as a whole. It seeks to address high level economic issues across the county and there are currently no perceived negative impacts. If any negative impacts are identified, steps will be taken to address these by working together with stakeholders and partner organisations. An Equality Impact Assessment has been prepared for the Strategy, identifying where the strategic priorities focus on positively impacting protected characteristic groups.
- 7.4 Climate change – The Economic Strategy supports commitments in the Council’s Climate Change Strategy. Net zero ambitions feature strongly with the strategic priority to ‘support the transition to net zero and resilience to climate change’. Priorities under this ambition include supporting businesses, developing clean energy industries, decarbonising transport, and embedding circular economy principles. The strategy also seeks to support our land-based industries to develop innovative approaches to reduce emissions and enhancing natural capital through regenerative tourism.
- 7.5 Crime and disorder – The Economic Strategy seeks to facilitate an inclusive workforce by supporting priority groups into work and promoting workforce diversity. Studies have repeatedly linked unemployment to rising crime. Improving the economic prospects of the county’s residents through the Strategy and Action Plan may contribute to reducing crime and anti-social behaviour.
- 7.6 Public health – The Economic Strategy seeks to facilitate an inclusive workforce by supporting priority groups into work and promoting workforce diversity, including through strategic relationships with health. Studies have repeatedly linked unemployment to the deterioration of health. Improving the economic prospects and wellbeing of the county’s residents through the

Strategy and Action Plan may reduce inequalities and unemployment due to ill health.

- 7.7 Social value – The Strategy and Action Plan will deliver in line with the Council’s commitments to improving the social, economic, and environmental wellbeing of the local area.

Lee Harris

Executive Director of Place Services

Contact Officer: Carolyn Carr, Economic Development Strategic Lead,
033 022 23836 carolyn.carr@westsussex.gov.uk

Appendices

Appendix A: West Sussex Economic Strategy 2025 - 2035

Appendix B: West Sussex Economic Strategy Evidence Report

Background Papers

None