

# Maidstone Draft Economic Development Strategy 2015-2031: Residents' Consultation Executive Summary



Prepared by:



On behalf of:



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## Executive Summary

Between January 5<sup>th</sup> and January 20<sup>th</sup> 2015, 1,518 Maidstone residents took part in a 10 minute telephone interview seeking their views on Council priorities for the next 16 years. They were asked questions related to the priorities outlined in the borough's Economic Development Strategy (EDS), in order to test the resonance of these priorities with the local population.

The survey was structured to ensure representation of key sub-groups of Maidstone residents and the final data was weighted to reflect the profile of the borough as a whole.

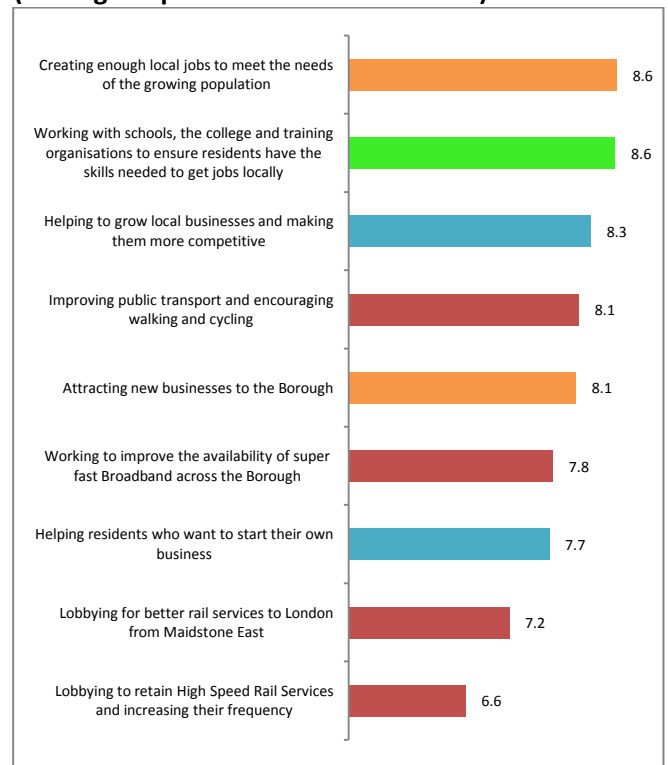
Consultation activities around the EDS also included an 'open consultation' allowing residents to view and comment on relevant documents via the Council's website and an email survey of businesses.

The key findings from the consultation are set out below.

### Maidstone residents generally appear to be in agreement with the priorities outlined in the EDS

The consultation survey suggests that the feelings and preferences of Maidstone residents are closely aligned with the priorities outlined in the EDS. Residents give an average importance score of at least 7 out of 10 for eight of the nine the EDS-related priorities put to them, and this average score is closer to at least 8 out of 10 for seven areas.

**Figure 1: Importance of key activity areas to Maidstone residents**  
(Average importance score – out of 10)



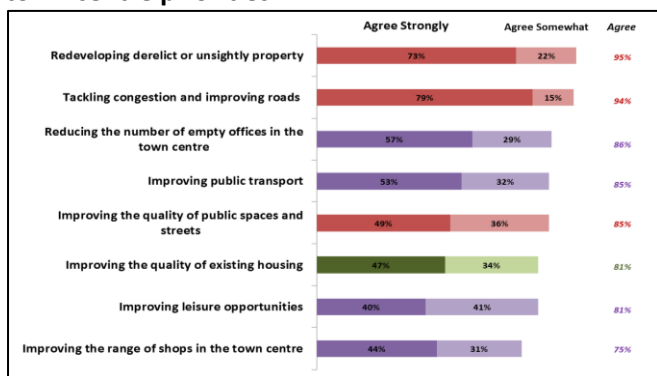
Base: 1,518 Residents.

#### Key (Relevant EDS priorities)

Retaining and attracting investment	Orange
Stimulating entrepreneurship	Blue
Meeting the skills needs	Green
Improving the infrastructure	Red

At least three quarters of residents would agree that each of the infrastructure, housing and town centre activity areas they were asked about should be prioritised and this figure rises to 95% for redeveloping derelict or unsightly property, the action gaining the highest level of support.

**Figure 2: Agreement with infrastructure, housing and town centre priorities**



Base: 1,518 Residents

**Key (Relevant EDS priorities)**

Enhancing the town centre	Blue
Improving the infrastructure	Red
Improving housing	Green

While there are variations in the importance attached to different priorities by different types of residents, none of the priorities tested appears overly polarising and the lowest average importance rating given by any sub-group (a score of 5.2 given by residents of Boughton Monchelsea & Chart Sutton ward to ‘Lobbying for better rail services to London from Maidstone East’) sits above 5 out of 10.

When given the opportunity to suggest anything further that could be done to improve the local economy, residents tended to mention activities linked to the key principles of the EDS, notably improving the town centre, enhancing the borough’s infrastructure and creating high level jobs.

**Figure 3: Thematic grouping of spontaneous suggestions for other action the Council should take to improve the local economy (Most common themes)**

Theme area	% mentioning
Focus on the town centre and its appearance and bring in better shops, cafes and businesses	16%
Improve roads	14%
Create more diverse local jobs and apprenticeships, including well paid, quality jobs, not just service jobs	10%
Improve infrastructure e.g. the number of schools, doctors, supermarkets etc	10%
Reduce parking fees, more parking spaces, better use of traffic wardens and Park & Ride	9%
Improvements to public transport including cheaper fares and improvements to bus and train services	7%
Decrease congestion and avoid grid lock	7%
Build on existing sites and brown fields to maintain open, green spaces	7%
Encourage small business including offering opportunities and smaller spaces for businesses, emphasising production and industry rather than large supermarkets	7%
Reduce shop and business rates/ rents	4%
Maximise the river, improve the riverside, make the most of the new bridge	4%
Make areas look nicer, tidier and smarter	3%
Create new houses, including by converting empty offices into accommodation	3%
Offer amenities for younger people - after school clubs, playgroups	3%
Better planning/ planning permission	3%
Stop wasting money/ prioritise budgets	3%

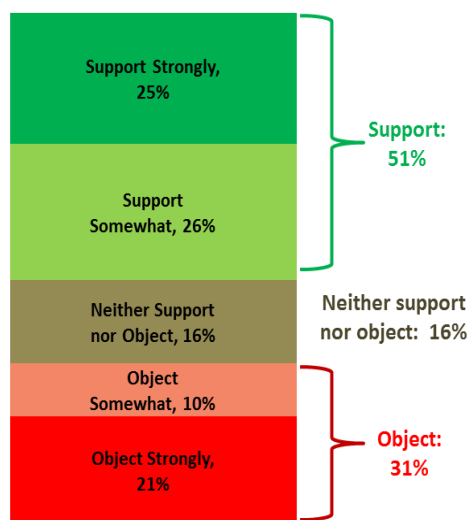
Base: 795 residents making a suggestion. Table shows theme areas mentioned by at least 3% of respondents. Multiple responses possible.

**Key (Relevant EDS priorities)**

Retaining and attracting investment	Orange
Stimulating entrepreneurship	Blue
Enhancing the town centre	Blue
Improving the infrastructure	Red
Improving housing	Green
Creative/ cultural offer	Light Blue
Other	Light Green

While reactions to the idea of a new employment site at Junction 8 were mixed, over half of residents said they would support this, with a further 1 in 6 having no opinion. Those who would object represent less than a third of those interviewed and are most likely to live within neighbouring wards.

**Figure 4: Levels of support and objection to the idea of a new business park at Junction 8 – All residents**



Base:1,518 Residents

Agreement with the content of the EDS also extends to responses to the open consultation and business survey, with very few respondents noting any divergence between their views and the key elements of the strategy.

### Local jobs and skills are of prime importance to residents, who are able to take a long term view of priorities for the borough

It is fitting that the “twin” priorities of ‘Creating enough local jobs to meet the needs of the growing population’ and ‘Working with schools, the college and training organisations to ensure residents have the skills needed to get jobs locally’ share joint first place as the most important to Maidstone citizens. These two areas are inextricably linked and this is highlighted in the comments made by residents and respondents to the open consultation and business survey as well as in the EDS itself.

*“They should help the youngsters regarding their prospects for work.”*

Female, 75+, Retired, Shepway South Ward

*“They need to provide more educational opportunities for people on benefits.”*

Male, 35-44, Self-employed (Within Maidstone), South Ward

Both these areas receive an average importance rating of 8.6 out of 10 and are rated 10 out of 10 for importance by almost half of respondents. Further, a call to create more diverse, high quality local jobs, including mentions of apprenticeships, represents the third most common theme among spontaneous suggestions for additional activity to be undertaken by the Council.

The high importance attached to local job creation and skill development extends beyond those who would directly benefit from these initiatives to older, retired people. Older members of the community see these goals as worthwhile either because of the potential benefits for their own younger family members or out of concern for or pride in the borough as a whole.

*“It took my grandson ages to get a job when he left school. How are they meant to get experience when nobody will employ them in the first place?”*

Female, 65-74, Retired, Harrietsham & Lenham Ward

*“Quality not quantity of jobs – jobs that last.”*

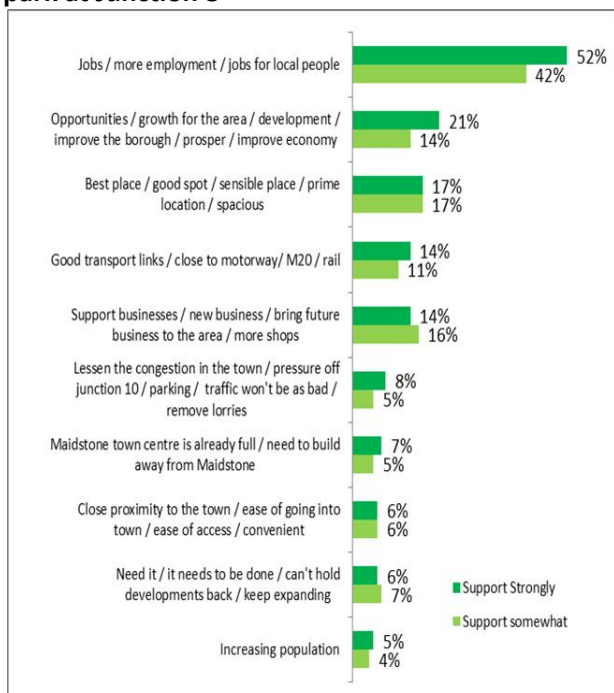
Male, 55-64, Retired, North Downs Ward

Those who currently commute out of the borough to work appear less engaged with local priorities generally, and this includes interest in the creation of local jobs. If out-commuters are happy with their current situation and reluctant to move to newly created local positions, this will make upskilling of new entrants to the labour force; including young people, the unemployed and those returning to work from carer/ homemaker roles; even more important.

The importance of local employment creation to Maidstone residents is further demonstrated by the position of this consideration as the top reason to support a new employment site at Junction 8 of the M20, mentioned by more than half of those who would strongly support this development. This is also an important rationale for those who would “support somewhat”. Comments made by this group suggest that some see the development as a “necessary evil”, with the need for job creation outweighing other concerns around environmental impact or a preference for other priorities, such as town centre

regeneration, that would more immediately affect their own quality of life.

**Figure 5: Top 10 reasons to support a new business park at Junction 8**



Bases: Support Strongly = 355 respondents, Support Somewhat = 360 respondents. Multiple responses possible. Top 10 answers shown.

The importance of priorities such as local job creation and upskilling to residents, as well as the comments made around these topics, suggest that Maidstone citizens are able to take a *long term* view when assessing the priorities they consider most important, supporting initiatives that may require planning and investment over many years, rather than just “quick fix” solutions.

Indeed, a key area where the views of those responding to the open consultation and business survey diverge from the principals of the EDS is a feeling that the strategy as a whole and the vision in particular, is not forward-looking *enough*, lacking ambition and distinctiveness.

### The potential for infrastructure and “quality of life” improvements is particularly valued

At the same time, residents are keen that the Council takes action on infrastructure improvements, especially ‘redeveloping derelict or unsightly property’ and ‘tackling congestion and improving roads’, both of which receive almost universal agreement. The importance of infrastructure activity also comes through strongly in the comments made by residents

when asked what else the Council could be doing to improve the local economy.

*“Derelict properties should be done up to look better. Empty shops make the town look very unattractive.”*

Male, 35-44, Employed (outside of Maidstone), Marden and Yalding Ward

*“People are being put off of Maidstone. It’s a miserable driving experience, we try not to do it if we can.”*

Male, 55-64, Retired, Staplehurst Ward

Improvements to infrastructure represent the type of activity that can have an immediate, tangible and visible impact for residents, meaning that it is unsurprising that they are valued. This activity is less obviously linked to economic development than work to create local jobs or upskill residents, but it will help to increase the *quality of life* that residents enjoy. This is highlighted in the EDS as a factor contributing to a successful local economy by indirectly driving economic competitiveness and as something that is important for attracting new investment. It is therefore identified as an overarching element of the EDS vision for 2031.

Infrastructure improvements can be seen as a “win win” activity, with these not only improving the lives of existing local residents but also playing a role in attracting and retaining skilled employees and high quality businesses.

### There is some tension between rural and urban priorities

In reviewing the survey responses, a certain tension can be seen between economic goals, such as creating jobs, and quality of life factors like the borough’s unique rural environment, with many residents noting that a balance needs to be struck. This echoes the EDS commitment to achieving growth sustainably without sacrificing the environmental qualities that make Maidstone a special place.

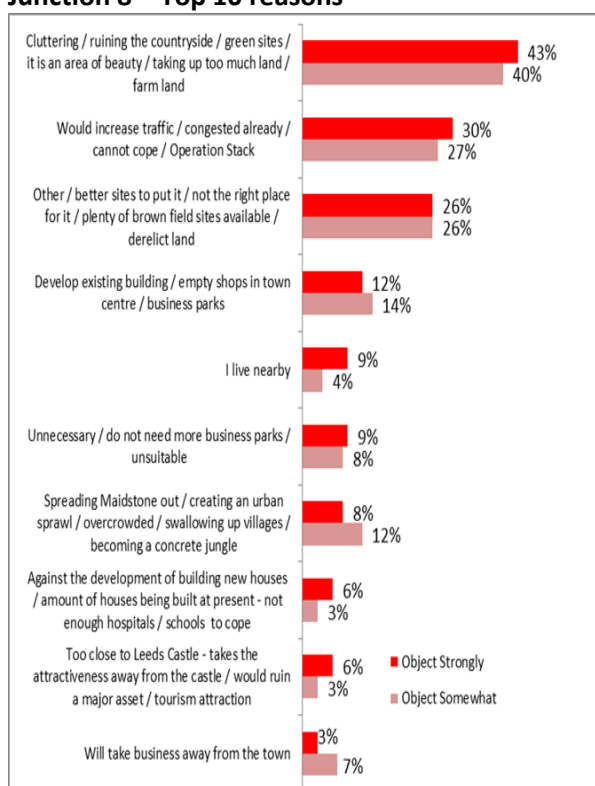
This tension is particularly evident in the views of residents in neighbouring rural wards towards the potential creation of a new employment site at Junction 8 of the M20. These residents are rightly concerned about the nature of any development in this location and the impact it may have on the



countryside and rural way of life that they see as a key strength of their local area.

Conversely, there is also some resistance to the idea of a new employment site at Junction 8 from urban residents who feel that more focus should be placed on improving in-town locations before looking at out of town developments. This appears to partly stem from residents drawing their own conclusions about what a new site might look like, for example imagining that this might include significant elements of retail units or housing. This group may be more receptive to the idea of a new Junction 8 employment site if given fuller information on what exactly this would entail.

**Figure 3.6: Why object to a new business park at Junction 8 – Top 10 reasons**



Bases: Object Strongly = 398 respondents, Object Somewhat = 166 respondents. Multiple responses possible. Top 10 answers shown.

There are also some other differences in the prioritisation of activities by rural and urban residents. For those living in rural areas, especially in certain wards where connectivity is a particular issue, working to improve the availability of super-fast broadband across the borough is a key priority. In contrast, urban dwellers are more likely to prioritise improvements to rail services, as well as having a greater desire to attract new businesses to the borough.

### Transport issues are a key concern

Maidstone’s transport links emerge from the survey as a key area of concern for residents. This relates particularly to congestion, especially on the M20 and town centre roads, and to parking issues.

*“The M20 is currently at a standstill every morning and evening around Maidstone. How can any further growth possibly be accommodated unless this is addressed?”*  
Business Survey Respondent, Male, Creative Sector, Gillingham

However, there does also appear to be a strong interest in improved public transport and in encouraging other car-free options.

Improvements to *local* public transport, for example bus links into the town centre, are prioritised well above lobbying for better rail links to London. It may be that to some extent this prioritisation reflects the Council having less scope to act, able only to *lobby* for improvements, rather than make these directly. However, it is likely that rail links are considered a lower priority as travelling to London represents something that is not necessarily part of the day to day life of the average Maidstone resident. This extends to those who commute out of the borough to work, for whom road links to neighbouring Kent towns appear to be a more immediate priority.

Improving rail links to the capital is highlighted by respondents to the business survey as something they would prioritise, given that they consider the current situation a constraint on growth. This may also be something that will be important in attracting new businesses to locate in the borough, suggesting that it could be considered a *strategic* concern, even if it does not feature on the everyday radar of most residents.

Transport issues play a key role in attitudes towards a potential new employment site at Junction 8 but the same concerns feature as a reason for both support and objection, depending on how the likely future impact of the site on the road network is interpreted. This suggests a need to try to ensure that secondary benefits of this kind, for example reduced pressure on roads in the town centre or improvements to the junction itself, can be achieved and that these feature in any communication about the scheme.

### **The survey supports the idea of an entrepreneurial borough**

The survey findings support the idea that Maidstone is an *entrepreneurial* borough, identified as a key strength in the EDS. There appears to be particular support for the idea of trying to encourage growth from within, with helping to grow existing local businesses prioritised above attracting new businesses to the borough. A high level of importance is also attached to helping local residents who would like to start their own business and help and support for small businesses features as a key theme among spontaneous suggestions for action.

Self-employed residents surveyed suggest that they would appreciate assistance from the Council, including calling for practical measures that would help them, including access to appropriate business space and leniency on issues such as business rates and “red tape”.

The findings suggest that young people may be particularly interested in entrepreneurship, with younger residents expressing an interest in start-up information, including disseminating this via schools and colleges.

*“Improve start up information for small businesses which will improve the local economy.”*

**Female, 16-24, Employed (Within Maidstone), Barming Ward**

*“Go to schools and colleges and educate people on starting their own business.”*

**Male, 16-24, Student, Park Wood Ward**