West Sussex Economic Strategy

# West Sussex Economic Strategy 2025 – 2035 Annual Report 2025 – 2026

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# Introduction

The achievement of the West Sussex Economic Strategy 2025-2035 is overseen by the West Sussex Economic Growth Board which brings together leaders in business, local government, education, and health.

The strategy  sets out a vision to 2035 and five key ambitions to achieve the vision:

- boost productivity growth, investment and innovation
- ensure that we have a dynamic and skilled workforce
- boost green innovation, enhance natural capital and support the transition to net zero
- deliver new development and infrastructure and maximise the benefits of our international transport hubs
- sustain our distinctive and vibrant places and grow our visitor economy

The West Sussex Economic Growth Board endorsed a high-level Economic Strategy Action Plan for 2025-2026 setting out the activities and partners working to progress the economic strategy ambitions.

The purpose of the annual report is to provide an update on progress against the Action Plan 2025-2026, including a summary of progress against targets; case studies of action areas; and an update of the strategy's high-level economic indicators setting out the overall state of the West Sussex economy.

## Snapshot of progress in 2025 -2026

The Action Plan for 2025 – 2026 had 21 actions areas across the five strategy ambitions. The following sets out a snapshot of progress against the action area targets.

It shows how well the Action Area targets progressed across the five Economic Strategy Ambitions. There are both numeric and narrative targets, for example, the Made Smarter programme exceeded its 25/26 target by supporting 30 West Susses businesses, and the Sussex & Surrey Institute of Technology achieved its target by opening its doors in October 2026.

Figure 1 below highlights how many targets have been partially achieved (shown in amber), achieved (shown in green), or exceeded (shown in blue). Some targets contribute to more than one ambition, which is why the total number of targets shown is higher than the 21 action areas.

**Figure 1 - Graph of Progress Against Targets**

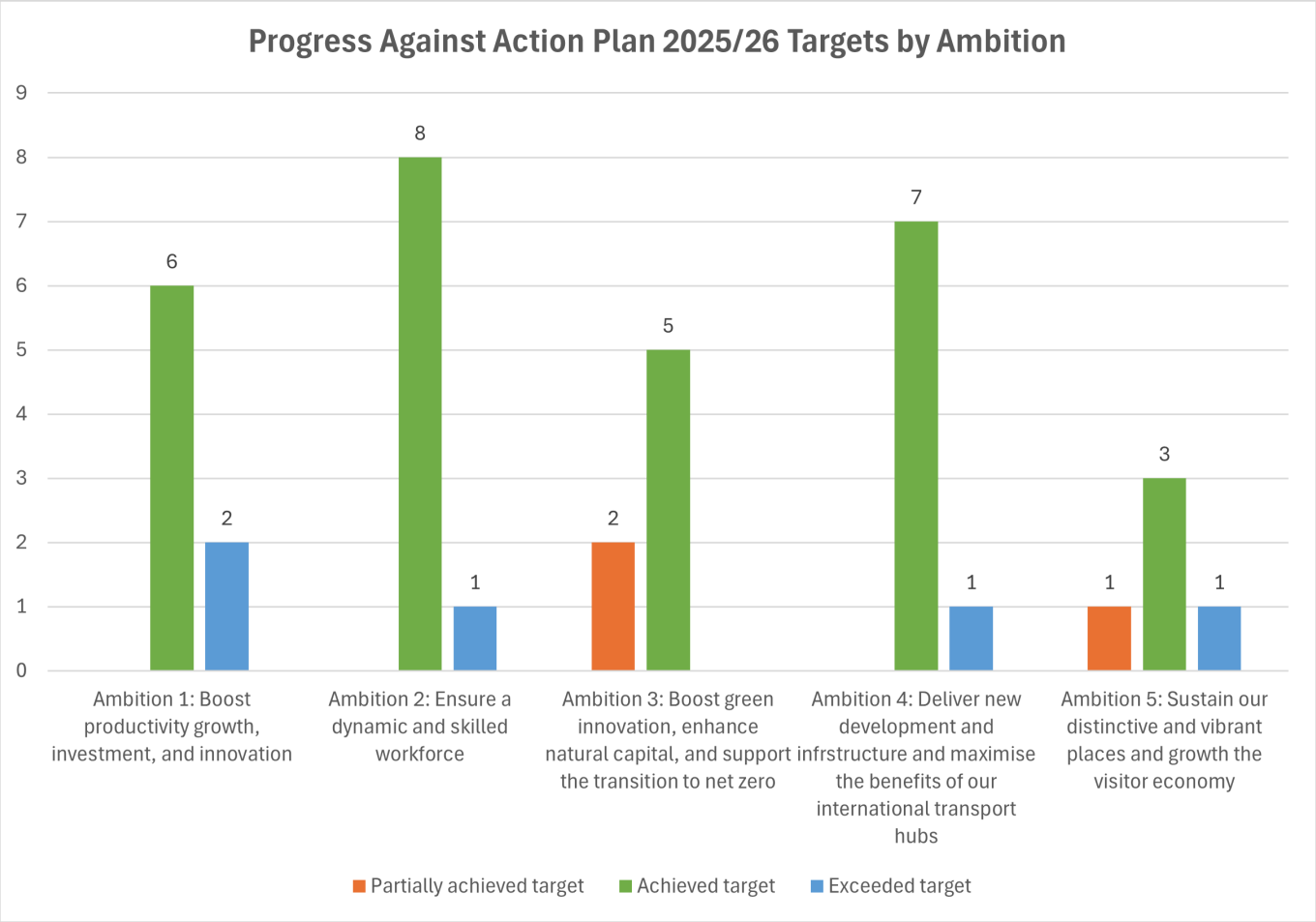
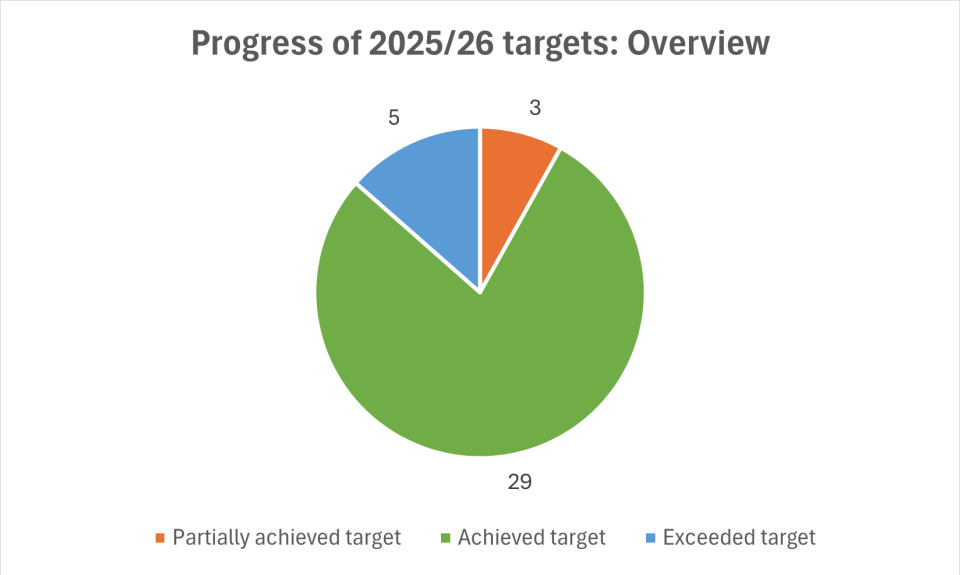


Figure 2 below provides an overview of the proportion of targets partially achieved, achieved or exceeded:

**Figure 2 - Pie chart of progress against targets**




Overall, the majority of action areas achieved the target for the year including: the West Sussex Economic Growth Board endorsing a programme of work for priority sectors and clusters for growth; the launch of the Connect to Work programme in November 2025; and a strong West Sussex presence at UKREiiF 2025 as part of the Gatwick Region Airport Economic Zone.

A small number of action areas only partially achieved targets for the year including: launching a solar group purchasing offer for businesses; and developing models for best practice for nature-based solutions for businesses, with the main reasons being unable to procure a suitable delivery partner for the former and lack of resource to take forward the work for the latter.

Five action areas exceeded targets including Create South East and Skills Bootcamps delivery in West Sussex. The main reason for targets being exceeded was a larger than anticipated interest in the programmes.

More detailed information on progress can be found in Appendix I – West Sussex Economic Strategy Action Plan – Progress Update 2025-26.

## Delivering the ambitions – Case Studies

### Ambition 1: Boost productivity growth, investment and innovation

Featuring:

- The Growth Hub
- Made Smarter
- Create Growth

**Case study: West Sussex Growth Hub**

The West Sussex Growth Hub provides free business advice and support for small and medium sized enterprises in West Sussex. Funded by the Department for Business and Trade (DBT), experienced advisors facilitate strategic decision making and help businesses access resources that remove growth barriers and drive sustainable business success.

They help businesses make plans and direct them to solutions from the support available across the county including finance, innovation, net zero targets or access to specialists. Since April 2025 the Growth Hub engaged with a range of businesses through delivery of a Kickstart programme for start-up businesses, Business Support Clinics in each of the district and boroughs and a Future CEO peer support programme for growing and scaling business leaders.

The Growth Hub achieved its 25/26 target by supporting just over 400 businesses.

**Case study: Made Smarter**

Made Smarter is a digital and technological adoption support programme for manufacturing sector businesses, funded by the Department for Business and Trade.

The programme provides funding across the South East region to deliver targeted support for manufacturing businesses including digital and technology advice, bespoke adoption roadmaps, match-funded grants and leadership and management support. Made Smarter exceeded its 25/26 target with 30 West Sussex businesses being accepted onto the programme.

**Case study: Create South East**

Create South East is backed by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and provides expert support, mentoring, tailored workshops, and investment opportunities for creative businesses in West Sussex, Kent, Essex, and East Sussex to help them grow and secure funding.

The programme is targeted for businesses with high growth potential and offers intensive support on building foundations and for scaling, covering sectors like design, fashion, tech, film, and games, with a goal to boost innovation and investment.

Create South East in West Sussex exceeded its 25/26 target with engagement from just over 40 businesses.

## Ambition 2: Ensure that we have a dynamic and skilled workforce

Featuring:

- Sussex & Surrey Institute of Technology (IoT)
- The Careers Hub
- Skills Bootcamps
- Connect to Work

### Case study: The Sussex & Surrey Institute of Technology

The [Sussex & Surrey Institute of Technology (IoT)] is a cutting-edge institute that brings together the latest in digital technologies, innovation, and industry-led education. It is a collaboration between universities, further education colleges, and industry partners across Sussex and Surrey, working together to provide students with a new kind of education, designed to prepare them for the jobs of tomorrow.

The focus of the IoT is to address higher level skills needs in: Engineering & Manufacturing Technologies, Digital Technologies, Construction, Planning & The Built Environment, and Sustainable Technologies & Practices.

The Sussex & Surrey Institute of Technology building opened in October 2025, located on the Crawley College Campus.

**Case study: Careers Hub**

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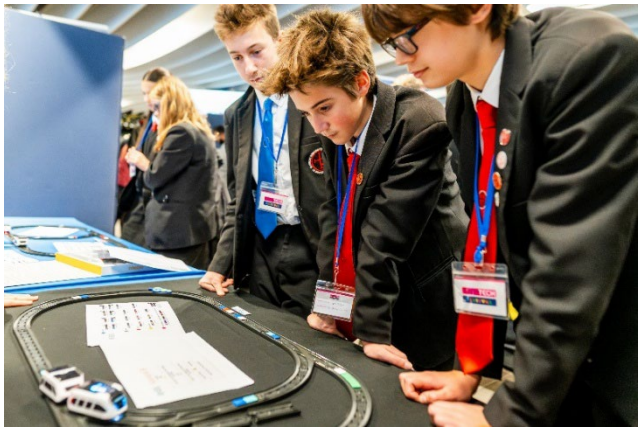

More than three hundred secondary school students from across West Sussex were inspired about their future careers at an interactive event at the Amex Community Stadium in November 2025.

The third TeenTech Sussex Festival, initiated by the West Sussex, Brighton & Hove Careers Hub as one of its many activities, brought together schools and universities along with local, national and international businesses and employers from a range of industry sectors.

A range of interactive activities took place where students could see firsthand the range of career opportunities open to them in science, technology, engineering and creative arts.

**Case study: Skills Bootcamps**

Since launching in summer 2025, West Sussex Skills Bootcamps have built strong early momentum. With £4.3m of Department for Education (DfE) funding in 2025/26, the programme delivers free vocational training to adults aged 19+ across the county, opening new pathways into skilled employment.

Skills Bootcamps are designed in liaison with local employers to address skills gaps in key sectors including construction, digital, manufacturing, education and horticulture. Each short-form course is designed to boost employability and culminate in a job interview or career progression for the learner.

The now established delivery infrastructure is supporting residents, employers, and the wider local economy. In its first year the programme commissioned capacity for over 1,200 learners with many expected to achieve positive employment outcomes through their participation.

Skills Bootcamps exceeded the 25/26 target by delivering 40 different courses and 991 learner starts.

**Case study: Connect to Work**

Connect to Work is a bold new programme designed to transform lives and unlock potential across the county has been made possible by a grant from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

The programme launched in November 2025 and aims to support up to 2,700 residents across West Sussex to 2030. Designed to help those facing the greatest barriers to employment—including people with disabilities, long-term health conditions, and other complex challenges—this voluntary employment support programme helps individuals find and stay in meaningful, paid work.

By the end of March 2026, the programme achieved 175 programme starts, with 175 residents enrolled and actively receiving support from a 1-1 Employment Advisor with some participants supported into paid employment.

## Ambition 3: Boost green innovation, enhance natural capital and support the transition to net zero.

Featuring:

- Growing Sussex

### Case study: Growing Sussex

Growing Sussex is an exciting project to co-develop and showcase foundational technology use cases, using 5G, IoT and AI with telecoms and technology partners, education centres and commercial producers.

With £3.8 million funding from the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), Growing Sussex focuses on how digital technology can develop future growing practices that increase sustainable food, drink and plant productivity.

In 2025 the programme won an additional £700k funding from DSIT for additional use cases on how digital technology can support innovation in the sector.

## Ambition 4: Deliver new development and infrastructure and maximise the benefits of our international transport hubs

Featuring:

- Project Gigabit
- West Sussex at UKREiiF

### Case study: Project Gigabit

Project Gigabit is the UK government's programme to enable hard-to-reach communities to access lightning-fast gigabit-capable broadband.

The fast, reliable connections delivered by Project Gigabit will benefit mostly rural and remote communities across West Sussex. The public roll out of the gigabit-capable infrastructure will bring many benefits to the county. It will enable homes and businesses to work, learn and stream content online with ease. It will also support economic growth and support the creation of new jobs and industries requiring advanced digital infrastructure.

By March 2025 77.5% of premises had access to gigabit-capable connectivity with more work delivering in 26/27.

**Case study: West Sussex at UKREiiF**

UKREiiF is a major annual event attracting around 18,500 attendees from the UK's real estate, development and construction sectors, including key decision makers from central and local government, industry and funders.

There was a strong West Sussex presence at UKREiiF 2025, with a number of partners attending as part of the Gatwick Region Airport Economic Zone delegation which included 27 partners from across the public and private sectors in the region. A range of meetings with partners and potential investors took place.

To support engagement, an Invest in West Sussex brochure was produced, showcasing the county's strengths, development projects, a commercial joint venture and major regeneration opportunities, aligned with the West Sussex Economic Strategy 2025 – 2035.

## Ambition 5: Sustain our distinctive and vibrant places and grow our visitor economy

### Case study: Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP)

East Sussex Brighton & Hove and West Sussex

Local Visitor Economy Partnership

Recognised by

VisitEngland

The Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) covering East Sussex, Brighton & Hove and West Sussex is the LVEP for the region following accreditation by VisitEngland. Partners have agreed a 10-Year Visitor Economy Strategy for Growth with a focus on partnership, inclusivity and sustainability.

The LVEP brings together Experience Sussex and Visit Brighton (the joint secretariat) along with local visitor destinations, District & Boroughs, and businesses to embrace the pan-Sussex ambitions and deliver on priorities including maximising opportunities from international gateways including Gatwick Airport and Newhaven Port, and boosting growth areas such as wine tourism. An industry led Advisory Board supports the achievement of the strategy.

Collectively, partners are striving to raise the profile of Sussex as a national and international visitor destination with the ambition to grow the visitor economy from £5 billion to £7.5 billion by 2034.

**Case study: Growth Deals**

GROWTH DEALS

The Growth Deals are partnership pledges made between the county council, district and borough councils and others to deliver on shared priorities. Highlights of 25/26 are set out below.

**Bognor Regis Esplanade Public Realm –** £1.8m: Traffic calming, improved walking/cycling access, enhanced crossings, and sustainable rain gardens, delivered alongside wider regeneration including the Alexandra Theatre upgrade, Arcade improvements, and a £13m Premier Inn investment.

**Western Boulevard, Crawley –** £1.9m: Road layout redesign with new bus infrastructure, upgraded public realm, and enhanced walking and cycling routes.

**Manor Royal Superhub, Crawley -** UK's first Superhub, transforming a key Manor Royal bus stop into an enhanced public space with a larger bespoke shelter, new seating, planting, and public art, creating a more welcoming and usable micro-park environment. Delivered through Manor Royal BID, with funding support from the Crawley Growth Programme and Crawley Towns Fund.

**Railway Approach, Worthing –** £3m: Upgraded station frontage with improved accessibility, greening, better lighting/CCTV, new cycle facilities, and
an Active Travel-funded contraflow cycle lane and raised priority crossing.

**Montague Gardens, Worthing –** £3.1m: Transforming Montague Place with new paving, trees, seating, performance/sundeck space, a green wall, and children's play area, funded through the growth programme and delivered by Worthing Borough Council.

**The West Green, Littlehampton –** £7.23m: Revitalised seafront with water play, climbing wall, beach sports courts, upgraded paths, seating, sustainable planting, and new food & drink kiosks, delivered by Arun District Council with a focus on accessibility and year-round use.

## Where we are now – economic overview from indicators

When the West Sussex Economic Strategy 2025 – 2035 was published in 2025, the economic indicators were based on the most recent data available at the time, which largely covered data from 2022. This Annual Report uses the latest publicly available data which continues to be subject to time lags and mainly relates to 2023–2024 data. As a result, the analysis does not reflect any economic impacts or developments from the past year.

Based on the available data, the West Sussex economy seems to have performed well compared with the wider Southeast region over this period. Of the 13 economic indicators assessed, West Sussex exceeded the target in nine, including economic growth and median earnings, both of which increased at a faster rate than the Southeast average. Two indicators—claimant count and working-age population—were in line with the target, showing little change.

Performance was below target in two areas: the proportion of residents with Level 4+ qualifications and apprenticeship completions. However, qualifications data are drawn from the ONS Annual Population Survey, which is robust at national level but less precise for local areas. The apparent decrease in Level 4+ qualifications between 2023 and 2024 is therefore not statistically significant. For apprenticeships, the data does not show the subject or level of study, and the lower number of completions may reflect a shift towards higher-level apprenticeships rather than an underlying decline.

The table below shows West Sussex's performance against each of the 13 high-level economic indicators included in the Economic Strategy. To read further analysis on the indicators please read Appendix II – West Sussex Economic Strategy – Economic Indicators Analysis – 2025-26.

**Table 1 - Economic Indicators Summary**

| Indicator | Original Baseline | Revised Baseline | Updated Value | Change (Count) | Change (percent) | South East Change | Above/Below target (value) | Above or Below Target |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Economic Growth (£m) (Current prices) | £26,727 (2022) | £25,406 (2022) | £27,962 (2023) | +£2,556 | +10.06% | +8.69% | +£347.04 | Above Target |
| Economic Growth (Chained Volume) 2022 prices | £26,727 (2022) | £25,406 (2022) | £25,962 (2023) | +£556 | +2.19% | -0.03% | +£562.78 | Above Target |
| Productivity (Current Prices) | £39.35 (2022) | £39.42 (2022) | £40.10 (2023) | +£0.68 | +1.7% | +1.4% | +£0.12 | Above Target |
| Productivity (Chained Volume) 2022 prices | £39.35 (2022) | £39.42 (2022) | £37.70 (2023) | -£1.72 | -4.4% | -4.6% | +£0.12 | Above Target |
| 3 Year Business Survival Rate | 63.6% (2019 births) | 63.6% (2019 births) | 59.5% (2021 births) | -4.1% | N/A | 57.8% | +1.7% | Above Target |
| Level 4+ Qualifications (16-64 Year Olds) | 49.1% (2023) | 49.1% (2023) | 42.2% (2024) | -31,700 | -6.9% | 48.2% | -5.9% | Below Target |
| Apprenticeships | 2,350 (2023/4) | 2,350 (2024/4) | 2,630 (2024/5) | +280 | +11.9% | +15.1% | -75 | Below Target |
| Claimant count | 2.6% (11/23) | 2.6% (11/23) | 3.0% (11/25) | +2,090 | +0.4% points | +0.2% points | 0.0% points | At Target |
| Employment rate | 77.6% (Jun 2024) | 77.6% (Jun 2024) | 81.1% (Jun 2025) | +20,500 | +3.5% points | 78.2% | +2.9% points | Above Target |
| Median Earnings for Full-Time Workers - Current Prices | £34,094 (2023) | £34,094 (2023) | £37,916 (2025) | +£3,822 | +11.2% | +9.5% | +£596 | Above Target |
| Median Earnings for Full-Time Workers - Chained Volume (2023 | £34,094 (2023) | £34,094 (2023) | £35,299 (2025) | +£1,205 | +3.5% | +1.9% | +£555 | Above Target |
| Working Age Population (16-64 years) | 59.31% (2023) | 59.20% (2023) | 59.20% (2024) | No change | N/A | No change | No change | At Target |
| House Price Affordability Ratio | 11.59 (2023) | 11.59 (2023) | 10.15 (2025) | -1.44 | N/A | -0.96 | -0.48 | Above Target |

## Summary and Next Steps

Overall, delivery of the West Sussex Economic Strategy in its first year has been successful. Most Action Plan targets for the year were achieved or exceeded, with only three areas partially achieved that are being taken forward in 2026-27. Likewise, performance against the economic indicators was also positive with West Sussex performing above the target across most of the monitored indicators.

An Action Plan for 2026-27 has been developed and largely continues the action areas set out in 2025–26, alongside a small number of new additions. These include working in partnership to deliver the Work Well programme across Sussex and Surrey (within the Integrated Care Board geography) and developing a Local Area Energy Plan for West Sussex.

Reflecting on progress in 2025–26, the West Sussex Economic Growth Board identified two priority areas for further discussion in 2026–27: creating additional opportunities for young people to enter the workforce, and improving access to finance that better responds to business needs. These will also be progressed.

Further information and progress updates are available on the Economic Strategy webpage and via the West Sussex Economic Growth Board LinkedIn. Contact details are also provided on the Board page to get in touch, ask questions, or engage with this work.