

**PRESS RELEASE**  
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## **NEW POWERS FOR KENT COUNCILS TO DRIVE ECONOMIC RECOVERY**

Councils in North Kent are today being given new freedoms and powers to work together to improve employment, skills, housing and transport in their region, announced Communities Secretary John Denham

The issues that affect people's lives like jobs and housing do not stop neatly at council boundaries. Councils increasingly need to join forces across their borders to mastermind regional solutions for getting more people back in to work, raising skill levels, or developing new transport links. The Government is helping local authorities to work together to do this through new Multi-Area Agreements (MAAs).

Today councils in North Kent are signing up to the next wave of MAAs - giving them new powers to devise their own plans and spend money as they see fit to tackle the most pressing issues in the region and drive economic recovery.

The North Kent Multi-Area Agreement (MAA) focuses on how to achieve ambitious targets for Thames Gateway by tackling the underlying challenges of regenerating the area for the benefit of local residents and businesses.

The MAA has been developed by the local authority partners of Thames Gateway Kent Partnership (TGKP), which champions the economic, social and environmental regeneration of North Kent on behalf of Kent County Council, Medway Council and the local authorities of Dartford, Gravesham and Swale.

The partnership is driving action on a number of fronts, facilitated by commitments made as part of the MAA and beyond, including:

- Support the delivery of 58,000 jobs and 52,000 new homes for North Kent by 2026.
- Increase by 14% the number of people (equivalent to 44,000 people) with 5 GCSEs A\* to C or higher (NVQ level 2) by 2014.

- Narrow the gap between North Kent and the South East of the number of people qualified to degree level and above (NVQ 4+).
- Look into the feasibility of rolling-out Bus Rapid Transit systems based on the Fastrack model in Medway and Swale.
- Secure the infrastructure needed for development at Ebbsfleet Valley, including upgrading at A2-Bean Junction and links between Easter Quarry and Bluewater.
- Cut carbon emissions by more than 16.7% compared to 2005, by implementing a major programme to retrofit thermal, energy and water efficiency measures to both public and private sector homes as well as public transport improvements.

John Denham said: "Today's agreement will mean North Kent's five councils and partners will have more power locally to deliver jobs, training, welfare support and economic resilience for the region – helping to deliver 58,000 jobs and 52,000 new homes by 2026 as part of the wider growth of the Thames Gateway.

"The issues affecting people's lives don't stop neatly at local authorities' boundaries and MAAs are allowing councils to work together to mastermind regional solutions to meet the priorities and needs of their communities."

"By joining forces through MAAs, councils will also avoid unnecessary duplication helping to ensure that taxpayers' money is being worked as hard as possible in the current climate."

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Kevin Lynes, Chairman of Kent Thameside Regeneration Partnership, KCC Cabinet Member for Regeneration and member of TGKP, said: "KCC is already doing great things for people in Kent Thameside. We are opening the first-ever multi-purpose learning and community campus in Kent at The Bridge development and with Arriva we have established the award-winning Fastrack service with buses running on dedicated routes between Dartford and Gravesham - which has attracted international attention.

"KCC recognises the importance of the Thames Gateway as the largest regeneration project in Europe and residents are already seeing the benefits of our activity. The multi-area agreement signals closer working with our partners in key areas. This will ensure we capitalise on every opportunity as we emerge in good shape from the recession."

Rodney Chambers, Leader of Medway Council and member of TGKP, said: "As the UK's most ambitious regeneration area it makes sense for groups of local authorities in an area like North Kent with shared economic issues to work together. We share a common legacy of challenges, inherited from our industrial history, but importantly a shared set of opportunities.

"The MAA gives us a framework and structure for our collaborative working and the delivery of Government programmes. I am pleased that Medway Council has taken the lead to bring about this agreement, which will greatly benefit the people of North Kent. It's an area with huge potential and an exciting future, and that future is best served by working in partnership on key issues such as skills and employment, highways and transport and housing. These are clearly issues that cross local authority boundaries and they need to be tackled together to ensure success in stimulating the region's economic growth and prosperity."

South East Regional Minister Jonathan Shaw said: "Strong partnership working has already played a significant role in developing the MAA and accelerating progress in the regeneration of North Kent, and continued participation between partners will be key to the successful delivery of the MAA.

"Many local partners have come together with the Thames Gateway Kent Partnership and participated in working groups which had as their themes housing, infrastructure and skills/employment. These are all key priorities I am addressing as regional minister."

As part of the MAA, Government and North Kent partners will work together to plan future housing and regeneration investment in the area. North Kent will be one of only three areas in the South East piloting new investment plans with the Homes and Communities Agency under the 'Single Conversation'.

As a result of the MAA Government and North Kent partners will examine ways of getting quicker and more certain delivery of transport infrastructure by, for example, streamlining appraisals. It will also include helping to shape the arrangements for the future sustainability of Fastrack, and looking at the scope for rolling out the Fastrack concept to other parts of North Kent.

Jim Brathwaite, Chairman of SEEDA, commented: “The MAA represents a significant milestone in co-ordinating the activities of regional and local partners and central government in an area that is critical to our economic prosperity. SEEDA very much welcomes the direct and measurable impact this initiative will have on infrastructure, skills and jobs. We look forward to working with our partners to implement the MAA programme.”

The signing of the MAA took place at The Nucleus business and innovation centre, part of The Bridge, the £500 million integrated commercial and residential development being created by ProLogis and Dartford Borough Council.

After meeting the North Kent partners and key organisations, the Minister saw a number of regeneration projects in the area. He visited Fastrack, the award winning bus-based rapid transport system; a new housing development by Wimpey and the Learning & Community Campus at The Bridge, Dartford.

### **Notes to editors**

1. To help improve employment opportunities and skills levels for local residents and business, the MAA also includes plans to establish an employer-led Employment & Skills Board capable, if required, to take on statutory powers to determine adult skills training needs and provision.

2. With the region experiencing growing level of unemployment the MAA will target Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) and LSC funded programmes to help local unemployed people secure training and get into work, taking a more flexible approach to suit peoples' needs.

3. The MAA's focus on skills and training also aims to ensure that LSC funding will be used more flexibly to tailor training provision more closely to the needs of the region's employers.

#### **4. Additional comments from senior representatives from local authorities:**

Councillor Jeremy Kite, Leader of **Dartford Borough Council**, said: “This MAA has been many months in the preparation and its signing today is a real milestone for the area.

“Building strong communities depends on all the important stakeholders being flexible with each other and co-operating fully as partners in a common enterprise. Negotiating this MAA has seen the government extend some new freedoms to us and seen us give meaningful commitments in return. The winners will be local people who will see improved employment and training prospects and some common-sense investment in our neighbourhoods.”

**Gravesham Borough Council** leader Cllr Mike Snelling said: “This is an essential partnership for growth areas, such as the Thames Gateway (Kent), if community objectives are to be fully achieved. It is also a partnership where all parties, including government, have to work hard to fulfil their pledges and look for new and innovative solutions to the inevitable challenges which will arise.”

Councillor Andrew Bowles, Leader of **Swale Borough Council**, Chair of the Thames Gateway Kent Leaders' Board, and Vice-Chair of TGKP, said: “In the face of a recession, this agreement is about providing a better guarantee for economic success. We can now work together with our equally ambitious neighbouring authorities to address the big issues of housing, skills and transport.” ENDS

5. Other signatories of the MAA include Rt Hon Jonathan Shaw, Minister for the South East; Homes & Communities Agency (HCA); South East England Development Agency (SEEDA); the Learning & Skills Council (LSC) which plans and funds high quality education and training across England other than those in universities; and Jobcentre Plus.

#### **Programme and Photo opportunities:**

10.00hrs - Signing ceremony in main conference room

10.45hrs Secretary of State and entourage project visits

11.00hrs to 11.20hrs – Fastrack Bus Rapid Transit system. See Fastrack in operation, visit control centre, see Fastrack bus. Meet David George, Fastrack Project manager.

11.20hrs to 11.35hrs – Walk through new Wimpey Housing development meet new residents. Briefed by Jeremy Kite and Graham Harris.

11.35hrs to 12.00hrs – Tour the new Learning and Community Campus building

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