I have been honoured to be Chair of the LEP since 2017The South East LEP is a varied region, stretching along the coast from Harwich, through Ramsgate and Dover all the way to Peacehaven. The market towns, small cities, coastal communities, and villages of the South East LEP offer an exceptionally diverse choice of places to live and work across the local authority areas of East Sussex, Essex, Kent, Medway, Southend and Thurrock.

With eight ports, high speed rail links, and national and regional airport capacity, we are the most significant economic gateway and strategic route between mainland Europe, London, the rest of the country with access to global destinations. We are also home to eight major universities with internationally renowned research and teaching strengths. The South East is a great place to live and work and to do business, we have much to offer and great potential to continue to grow.

I am proud of what our partnership has achieved during the 2019-20 period. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic delivered an unexpected shock and is sure to have a significant impact on the way our economy works and communities interact in the short term. It is still important, however, to reflect on our achievements in 2019-20 and the excellent basis on which we have built our networks and resources as a partnership. It is these achievements that have given us the resilience needed to tackle this challenge together.

In 2019-20, after much hard work, dedication and commitment, the South East LEP (SELEP) became a company Limited by Guarantee, sealing its role as an independent partnership bringing together the public and private sectors. This process has also seen a recruitment drive for SELEP which has been locally driven and sourced from across the region. We have great diversity and skills in our membership, and we have improved our diversity and representation to have strong voices at each level in our partnership. This process has also seen us welcome Sarah Dance as Deputy Chair for the LEP. I am delighted for Sarah to be joining me; her networks, knowledge and experience of various projects and organisations across our patch make her the ideal candidate for this role, which will aid me in broadening our horizons across the South East and ensuring that our all-important relationships with stakeholders are maintained and improved.

The new faces round the Board table bring fresh voices and perspectives to be heard. We are grateful to all past Board members, some of whom had been members since our inception in 2011, for their hard work, expertise and willingness to raise challenges, and to share their views in professional and constructive ways. SELEP has grown into a strong partnership with a clear role in strengthening the economy of the South East. The drive and direction provided by Strategic Board members has been vital in securing this change.

The past year has seen extensive engagement and development of an evidence base for our future Local Industrial Strategy, which will set out clearly the vision and priorities for the area . This work has seen a pause in activity to allow us to focus our efforts on seeking to understand and helping to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we recognise that our future strategy will need to ensure that national and local policy and funding are aligned so that they work for the benefit of our area. This extensive engagement has meant we are well-placed now to reflect the changing economic circumstances of COVID-19 and the good work and relations over the past year have enabled the quick development of our recovery plan, which sets out the most significant impacts and opportunities for our economy, based on current intelligence and on economic priorities identified within SELEP and through local area recovery strategies. It also outlines the support that SELEP is providing to protect and boost the economy in the short term.

We continue to deliver our portfolio of projects through our Local Growth Fund (LGF) investments and supported by our Growing Places Fund (GPF) revolving loan fund. This year has seen XXX projects achieved, X released, X agreed for new projects and X new projects opened.

Our Sector Support Funding continues. These unique, one-off discrete pieces of work, which are of a pan-LEP nature, have a sector focus that drive forward the work and priorities of our working groups and identified priority sectors. This year our creative, rural, clean growth and housing groups have benefitted from this funding pot to drive tourism to our coastal areas, bolster support for local growers, analyse our local energy and clean growth supply chains, and accelerate delivery of high-quality development across the LEP.

Our sector-based working groups, made up of representatives of different organisations who give their time on a voluntary basis, continue to reap the benefits of cross-working. We have seen the development of a Coastal Prospectus which sets out xxx, the Social Enterprise Prospectus which xxx (ask Alex for a sentence). The Thames Estuary Production Corridor and Creative Estuary projects have made great strides in creating the foundation for a network of creative organisations, world-class cultural infrastructure and thousands of new jobs in the SELEP patch.

We have also seen great progress in the area of skills with our pioneering Tutor bursary scheme and the launch of our Digital Skills Partnership, which brings together businesses, education, public sector organisations and the charitable sector with the aim of creating a world leading digital economy that ensures the need for these vital skills is met across the South East. Supporting business is key, our Growth Hub continues to provide free support focussing on those businesses with potential and helping them unlock their growth.

We have achieved so much in this year; we are delighted to have been recognised by Government through our annual review process, to be rated as good for both Governance and Delivery and to have ‘achieved’ for our Strategy. We hold ourselves to the highest possible standards and it is great that the hard work of the partnership has been recognised in this way.

As always, there is more to do as we look to support the recovery of the economy. I want to thank all partners for their dedication and commitment to working together for the wider goal of growing our region’s economy and ensuring the South East plays its fullest role possible in achieving this.