I have been honoured to be Chair of the LEP since 2017. The South East LEP is a varied region; 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.

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 to reflect on our achievements 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 experience 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 around 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 Board members has been vital in securing this change. We welcome our new members and look forward to the new ideas and approaches they will bring.

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 been paused to allow us to focus on understanding and helping to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This extensive engagement has meant we are well-placed now to reflect the changing economic circumstances of COVID-19. 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 and outlines the support that SELEP is providing to protect and boost the economy in the short term.

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.