

KENT INVICTA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
EAST KENT ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GROUP (EKEDG)

Wednesday 3rd April 2024

Venue: Smith Woolley: Castle Avenue Folkestone.

1. Welcome and Apologies

Members Present:

Ray Johnson – Chair

Lee May – Brachers LLP

Andy Cruttenden – Martello Building Consultancy

Matthew Arnold - Stagecoach

Andrew Pledger – Barclays Bank

Jayne Miles – Dover District Council

Philip Clapham – Smith Woolley

Craig Styles – McIntyre Hudson

Paul Roberts – Metroline Security

Rod Lean – Folkestone and Hythe District Council

Tudor Price – Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce

Apologies:

Steve Wisbey – NIC Instruments Ltd

Jason Lewis – Stantech

Karen Dean – Brachers LLP

Daniel Sangiuseppe – Castlewood Hotels

Ella Brocklebank – Jenner

Mel Dizon - Martello

Paul Roberts of Metroline Security was welcomed to the group. PR explained that his business carries out fire risk assessments and installs security and fire detection systems. It employs 26 direct employees and employs sub-contractors.

2. Minutes of Previous Meeting:

Agreed.

3. Outstanding Action

Nothing outstanding.

4. Chairman's Comments and Report

RJ reported that he is due to attend a meeting this evening with the Prime Minister.

RJ also welcomed Tudor Price to the meeting and introduced him as the new CEO of the Invicta Chamber of Commerce following the retirement of Jo James.

TP explained that he currently looks after international trade for the BCC who has good links into central government feeding back business concerns as part of the "Where Business Belongs" project on issues such as the supply of planning officers to local authorities, VAT thresholds and the challenges from the forthcoming European Entry System. **TP** explained that the Chamber is working on a number of initiatives. Including (i) developing an effective exchange of information between the BCC and local chambers, (ii) developing a media strategy. The chambers is looking for "media members" from local ESG's who would speak to the media in their own capacity (rather than on behalf of the BCC) on relevant issues.

5. Sector Updates

RL reported – the levelling up project in Folkestone is commencing late summer 2024 with completion due approximately November 2025. The Council has received a petition opposed to the changes to the bus station arrangements. The VR showcasing the project has received 5000 hits so far. There will be disruption in the short term.

The UK shared prosperity fund and the rural England prosperity fund are over subscribed.

The Council is working with KCC regarding Dungeness. The Local economy is doing ok.

Tourism will face problems because of ESS. There are recruitment challenges for example in hospitality. The seafront development is progressing slowly. The Council is looking at options for the FOLCA Building.

CS reported – The food and agri' sectors are seeing the impact from climate change, price pressure from supermarkets. There has been a reaction from farmers in protest. The Construction sector is feeling the impact of inflation, with some businesses failing. There has been a growth of inward investment to the UK and an increase in M&A activity.

The budget only had a minor impact.

JM reported –

- Dover port was really busy for Easter holidays but roads were managed well and traffic was mostly free-flowing around the town.

- Nat West and Lloyds Banks in Dover are both closing soon which will be a real blow for the town centre. The agent reports that the Lloyds property has been sold but no information on what the plans are. Nat West doesn't appear to be on the market yet.
- Planning has now been submitted for Dover Beacon (Levelling up Fund/Future High Streets Fund) for a new education campus, business centre and creative centre in Bench Street.
- We are looking at new footfall counting systems so that we can measure the success of the work we are putting in. BT presented at KEDOG, lots of other authorities are interested but costs are high.

SW reported – via email “After a slow start last year, we finished well with one of our best years. On the 2nd Jan we took our largest order ever, £1.4M. We are on track to have our best year ever this year. We won another grant from Folkestone council, 40% towards green energy update stuff, the grant is worth about £12k. So, all in all, pretty good right now.

UK manufacturing remains challenging particularly due to policies such as BREXIT.

PC reported – the housing market is stagnant. Although the demand for residential letting is buoyant due to high demand and a lack of supply. The industrial market is strong. The market for town centre retail in Folkestone has corrected with a 25% reduction in letting values. There is no demand for larger units with national operators not interested but smaller independents are doing well.

AP reported – We are in the third year of digital growth grants, there have been no successful application from within the East Kent area. There is investment coming in from good quality start-up businesses and lots of investment into AI technology.

The impact of Pfizer pulling out of Discovery Park has not been as bad as anticipated. There are support sessions for staff looking to set up independently. DP is going along nicely with lots of SME's operation from the site.

MA reported – There has been a lot of direct foreign investment into transport companies in the UK plus M&A activity. Stagecoach is now through the driver shortage the current challenge is getting skilled engineers. £2.5m of new busses are now operating on the Folkestone to Canterbury route. Stagecoach will be operating the new fast-track link from Whitfield to Dover. The capped fare scheme will be continuing until June 2024 at least.

AC reported – As a small building consultancy they are doing well with contracts from local authorities for affordable homes. More broadly the construction sector is struggling.

PR reported – Recruitment of skilled engineers is a challenge with a lack of education and training opportunities for the fire and security sector.

6. Any other business & topics

None.

Date of next meeting

29th May 2024 Jenners