

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

Wednesday 29th May 2024

Venue: Jenner Construction Folkestone.

1. Welcome and Apologies

Members Present:

Ray Johnson – Chair

Lee May – Brachers LLP

Mel Dizon – Martello Building Consultancy

Andrew Pledger – Barclays Bank

Jayne Miles – Dover District Council

Craig Styles – McIntyre Hudson

Ella Brocklebank – Jenner

Paul Roberts – Metroline Security

Apologies:

Steve Wisbey – NIC Instruments Ltd

Jason Lewis – Stantech

Karen Dean – Brachers LLP

Daniel Sangiuseppe – Castlewood Hotels

Matthew Arnold – Stagecoach

Philip Clapham – Smith Woolley

Rod Lean – Folkestone and Hythe District Council

Lindsey Biggs – East Kent College

2. Minutes of Previous Meeting:

Agreed.

3. Outstanding Action

Nothing outstanding.

4. Chairman's Comments and Report

RJ reported that Lindsey Biggs from East Kent College has joined the group. She is not able to attend today's meeting but will be representing the college going forward.

RJ reported that with the General Election there will no doubt be information forthcoming from the Chamber.

RJ reported that he attended a parliamentary reception for Visit Kent. Also in attendance were representatives from the Port of Dover and Le Shuttle. Key points to note were:

- (i) They are lobbying hard to the return of Euro Star services to Ashford
- (ii) There are concerns about the forthcoming introduction of the European Entry System in October and the expected significant impact on travel and traffic within the Dover and Folkestone areas and further afield. The channel tunnel has put some measures in place to deal with the anticipated demand. However, Port of Dover faces additional challenges due to constraints on available space.
- (iii) The future expansion of electricity infrastructure at the Port of Dover to accommodate the needs of the recently introduced electric ferries.
- (iv) Initiatives to make the traffic through the county "smarter" through the use of technology.

RJ reported that he has been approached by Derek Burles regarding the introduction of solar energy projects in connection with the Otterpool development. DB is opposed to the use of agricultural land for this purpose. The group indicated that it would support the use of domestic micro generation as part of the Otterpool scheme but, at this stage, did not have sufficient information to offer a view on DB's objection. RJ to invite.

5. Sector Updates

EB reported – the construction sector still faces challenges but is stabilising following a difficult few years and developer confidence is growing with lots of new opportunities and the care sector is buoyant. The challenges include labour/skills shortages materials prices, build cost inflation all impacting on the viability of projects. Nutrient neutrality restrictions remain an issue for development in much of the county, particularly in Canterbury and Ashford. Solutions being proposed include the purchase of credits and on-site mitigation. There are viability challenges regarding schemes trying to achieve net zero – which are about 30% higher than non-net zero projects.

PR reported – The business is very busy. The challenges include recruitment of skilled engineers. There is a lack of awareness amongst landowners and managers of the requirements for fire risk assessments, despite these having been in place for many years now.

MD reported - they are receiving mixed feedback from the construction industry. Some companies are extremely busy, while others, do not have too much work on. This indicates that certain sectors are more affected than others. New builds, for instance, are struggling with costs and achieving planning approvals. Refurbishments are facing less stringent statutory requirements. Additionally, due to the decreased amount of work available, contractors are becoming more competitive with their pricing. Regarding Martello, we have a steady stream of work from local authorities thanks to the Dover District Council. Our new company, KPO

Architecture, is also gaining momentum by offering outsourced digital drawing services. This success is due to our competitive prices and the shortage of skilled professionals available to work in the UK.

LM reported – the legal sector remains busy with significant activity across the board, including residential and commercial property.

JM reported – Port traffic: Bank holiday weekend the whole of Dover town centre came to a complete standstill. Car parks were empty, residents couldn't get in or out of the town.

Levelling Up project: 'Dover Beacon' is progressing well. Planning is in and archaeology work is currently being carried out.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund: We have a variety of projects including improvements to town centres and green spaces.

Rural England Fund: £400k has been awarded as grants but will be paid as projects progress rather than upfront.

Empty shops: We've welcomed 6 new businesses to Dover but empty shops continue to be an issue (Deal and Sandwich not suffering like Dover). We've had quite a few successes working with the Planning Enforcement team to target scruffy properties in the town centres.

Cruise ships: Last week we had a Brazilian cruise ship visit and a two-day stopover for a Japanese cruise ship. We are speaking to East Kent College, hoping to use tourism students to provide a greeting service to those that visit the town centre.

Dover Fastrack: Project is nearly complete (electronic bus connecting the train station, town, castle and Whitfield).

CS reported – the accountancy sector is busy. Businesses are settling down after a few years of change. Recruitment is a challenge with fewer graduates coming forward. Challenges for clients include addressing issues with HMRC, for example processing R&D claims.

AP reported – good news to report in that Asymchem are moving into the pilot plant at Discovery Park. They will be taking a significant amount of space and employing hundreds of staff.

There are two programmes running at DP (i) to assist PHD students to commercialise their research and (ii) the Discovery Spark partnership between DP and Barclays focusing on women's health.

The Barclays "local specialist" in Deal is now operational with further due to come forward in Folkestone and Ramsgate.

RJ reported – that he can assist businesses and individuals who require specialist insurance services, particularly where bespoke policies are required which might attract a high premium.

6. Any other business & topics

None.

Date of next meeting

31st July 2024