

**KENT INVICTA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE**  
**MINUTES OF ASHFORD ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GROUP**

**HELD AT ASHFORD BUSINESS POINT**

**ON**  
**THURSDAY 16<sup>th</sup> August 2012**

<b>Present:</b>	Richard Lavender (Chairman) Andrew Osborne (AO) Viv Kenny (VK) Terry Botfield (TB) Graham Galpin	Richard Safford (RS) Christopher Calcutt (CC) Paul Rickards (PR) Geoffrey Hilton (GH) Heather Grigson (HG)
<b>Apologies:</b>	Hugh Summerfield (HS)	David Maddison (DM)
<b>Guests</b>	Sezen Zeki (KICC Membership)	Mike Bodkin (Peter Brett Associates)

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**1 Minutes of the last meeting**

The July meeting was cancelled

**2 Actions from Minutes and Matters Arising.**

Nil

**3 Action List Review**

All actions closed

**4. Chairman's Report**

Response from Lord Heseltine thanking us for our participation and have invited KICC CEO to discuss follow up next steps. BCC view that we do not want to lose our independence to represent businesses, but will work to a common goal

John Taylor, (MEDG), apologises but cannot make today's meeting.

RL attended MEDG to give short brief regarding activities within the AEDG and was made very welcome.

RL introduced Sezen Zeki, (SZ), the KICC Membership Officer for Ashford & Canterbury. SZ said that by attending the meeting it will give her a better feeling for what is happening in the Ashford area when talking to new and existing members. Member recruitment was quite good and targets of 10 new members per month for the Ashford area were well on target.

The After Hours Club was increasing in numbers and the venue had been changed from Boys Hall to The Conningbrook.

An initiative was introduced in Canterbury whereby the CEDG were invited to attend an After Hours Club meeting to mix with the members and update many on what was happening in the area. This proved very successful and SZ would like to think of carrying out the same for Ashford. It has also been suggested that Directors give a number of retention calls to members; this hopefully would improve relationships between the members and the Chamber.

GG asked if a New Members evening should be organised to introduce the staff as well as group members and Directors, SZ will look into this possibility.

TB asked if Apprenticeship information could be handed out at the After Hours Club meetings. SZ said she had no objections.

SZ hoped to attend regular meetings to give an update to membership numbers and take away useful information discussed at the AEDG.

**5. Group Reports**

**5.1 Local Authority (AO-GG)**

RL said that he had discussed with AO a presentation on the "Ashford Local plan to 2030". However both had agreed that this was a far too important subject to be covered in our normal meeting format and therefore AO would give a brief account of the document today and suggested a dedicated meeting for a greater in depth presentation to be given by the Planning Team at a future meeting.

AO presented today's briefing by stating that the Ashford Local Plan to 2030 was to be a Jobs led strategy document, and a crucial part of that process is estimating the growth expected in the economy of the area together with the number of new homes that will be needed. The Plan can then identify sufficient land to provide for those jobs and homes in the Borough to 2030.

There were six main questions being asked of members and it was important that these questions should be answered by individuals as well as businesses to give a true reflection of how we see the future of Ashford. A number of assumptions had been made in the report and it was proposed that a complete fresh look be given to the future of Ashford in this strategy document.

It was agreed that RL would arrange for the next AEDG meeting to be dedicated to a full discussion of the Ashford plan and AO would discuss with Simon Cole if he would be available to present.

ABC very pleased with the additional Portas funding of £100k. This with the existing Sainsbury's £100k should give us a good start on various projects.

Good news all round regarding Charter House and it appears this time it should complete. There has been a 106 Agreement on the New Town Development Site.

## **5.2 Planning (CC)**

CC said that there were no significant applications going forward, but consideration should be given to "change of use" regarding empty shops in the Town Centre. Recent Government changes should have helped this process, but very little appears to be happening.

## **5.3 Town Centre (VK)**

VK said that Ashford "Buzzed" on the day of the Olympic torch procession and this appeared good news to all retailers. VK mentioned the new K College and after today's KE announcement regarding jobs what was the position on starting the college build. The Town Centre is looking forward to this particular development. GG said that talks were taking place regarding the college, but could not at this stage say anything further, but would discuss any future development with VK.

## **5.4 Construction (PR)**

PR said that the KCFG was going from strength to strength, however some KCFG members did think it was possibly losing its localism and it may be necessary to bring it back to local groups. PR will keep us updated with this.

The barometer, or Pi chart is indication that 51% of members thinking the future prospects are looking good, with only 6% thinking things were still poor.

## **5.5 SME's (GH)**

GH said that there was not a great deal of change and mentioned that Commercial Vehicles are especially feeling the down turn. Security enquiries were reduced with companies doing without the luxuries of CCTV and sticking to basic needs. Private construction is very competitive with the leisure industry being hit badly. GH also mentioned that salaries have remained frozen and this is putting a squeeze on everyone. However he GH did mention what a wonderful week he had at the Olympic Sailing in Weymouth. (Things can't all be bad).

## **5.6 Environment (No holder)**

No report

## **5.7 Tourism Marketing (DM)**

No Report

## **5.8 Commercial Property (RS)**

RS said that there were very enquiries coming through at the moment, but he had managed to discuss several applications regarding Commercial/Retail premises with ABC. This is a difficult situation as it is difficult to get retail planning consent on an industrial site, however it is not easy to move certain operations into the Town Centre just satisfy the retail conditions. A warning was given that growing Warehouse/Retail business may have to leave the town to expand.

GG said that regarding Rates a reduction was received by all Lower High Street retailers during the major KCC works.

More flexibility could be exercised should Business Rating be returned to Local Authorities.

## **5.9 Transport & Infrastructure (HG)**

HG said that the Conningbrook project was progressing well, however the Planning Application is awaiting the Urban Sites Report.

Regarding the SE Rail Franchise the Chamber has submitted a report to The Department as requested outlining Kent Business needs. The main areas covered were Manston Park Rail Station and an Express Service from Ashford to Gatwick direct without connection changes as at present.

#### **5.10 Education & Skills (TB)**

TB said that exam results were in and it has been another good year for the Students. Gap year seems to have been ruled out this year with students trying to get work.

Unemployment is still very high amongst the 19/24. There appears to be either reduced or no additional support funding for the 25 + and employers will have to fund their own training to this year bracket. However funding is available for the 19/24 group.

TB mentioned the K College delay in Ashford and with large redundancies throughout the college and the possibility of one College Closing hopes for Ashford College development are on hold.

GG mentioned that Mike Hills, (KCC) is looking at extending Student travel passes.

#### **6. Actions from meeting**

1/ AO/RL to arrange September meeting for ABC 2030 Plan Presentation.

#### **7. AOB**

**Meeting closed at 5:30 pm**

**Next Meeting September 20<sup>th</sup> 2012**