

# Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce Maidstone Economic Development Group

Minutes of Meeting held on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> May 2012  
The Gatehouse, Archbishops Palace, Mill Street, Maidstone, ME15 6YE

**Present:** John Taylor(JMT) (Chair); John Foster(JF), Anna Bloomfield(AB), Bill Moss(BM), Allis Beasley(ABE), Chris Blundell(CB), Mandy Bearne(MB), Cllr Malcolm Greer(MG), Colin Davies(CD), Nick Rowell(NR), Patrick McVeigh(PM) of Shared Intelligence.

1.	<b>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE</b> Jo James(JJ), Keith Grimley(KG), Victoria Wallace(VW), Alan Reading(AR), Rob Edwards(RE).	
2.	<b>MINUTES OF LAST MEETING</b> Approved.	
3.	<b>MATTERS ARISING</b> Nil.	
4.	<b>MBC ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY UPDATE</b> <p>The Economic Development Strategy was commissioned in 2008 and a Regeneration Statement was produced in 2009. There is also an undated Draft Tourism Strategy. MBC now wish to refresh the Economic Development Strategy and to incorporate the Regeneration Statement. Shared Intelligence have again been commissioned to carry out this work.</p> <p>PM noted that he had previously attended an MEDG Meeting in 2008 during his work on the initial Strategy and that today was his first day working on the Strategy update. There had been some notable changes since the original Strategy such as KIG, economic issues and the Tourism Strategy. He would now be reviewing what actions needed to be taken and how Maidstone fits in with current SE-based organisations. He envisaged a 3-month piece of work which would need to fit in with the Core Strategy. He could foresee issues relating to jobs and the Town Centre and was seeking input from the Group.</p> <p>JMT said that at the time of the initial study that he hadn't fully appreciated the structure of businesses in Maidstone and how this appeared to have enabled them to weather the economic storm. On that basis in order to grow the local economy it would need importing substantial new business and thus the question of how to achieve this. PM said that this analysis could be helpful and added that there were still issues relating to the shake-out of Public Sector jobs.</p> <p>CD commented that The Chamber Maidstone Office was still holding 15 Business start-up meetings a week and that Maidstone was seen as a focus as the County Town. He felt that the Business Community needed to shout about Maidstone as BM does.</p> <p>NR said that recent Economic Surveys showed that 25% of businesses were in trouble but that a larger proportion were experiencing growth. Thus there were more winners than losers and that cash-flow was improving. MB said that she had statistics that could be shared with PM and noted that 24% of all jobs which came to Kent were in Maidstone. She felt that Maidstone needed Startup accommodation similar to the Medway Innovation Centre. PM said that this issue was raised in 2008 and he needed to look at why it had not progressed. AB asked why the increase in proportion of jobs coming to</p>	

	<p>Maidstone and MB said that she would provide information following the Meeting. ABE asked if any other town gained a higher proportion of jobs than Maidstone; MB felt that this was unlikely but the only possibility would have been Medway.</p> <p>MG said that a lot of effort had been put into saying that Maidstone was “open for business”. He noted the forthcoming development of the new Hospital and that this would drive the infrastructure issues around the Eclipse development. He also highlighted the success of G-Forces, the impact of the High Street redevelopment, the speeding up of the planning process and the planned MidKent College refurbishment.</p> <p>BM said that the retail vacancy rate and footfall in Maidstone were both better than the national average and that 50% of shops in Maidstone are independents. Possibilities for future development included the Maidstone East Station area and the old Army &amp; Navy Store. He said that there was plenty of empty office space within the Town but much of it was of a quality that nobody wanted. There is plenty of parking within the Town although this was to some extent over-priced. Park &amp; Ride has to be the solution. CD said that the Serviced Office complex in Knightrider Street was now 50% full because they offered on-site car parking.</p> <p>JF said that the empty office issue had not been missed. PM said that he was aware of the issue from the previous study and now needed to look for actions.</p> <p>BM said that Maidstone was starting from a high success point but that there was an issue of visibility at the County level.</p> <p>JMT said that The Chamber was working with other organisations in the regeneration field and with MidKent College with a view to providing startup facilities with Maidstone and other areas within the County.</p> <p>CB said that there needed to be a broad offering of employment, not all jobs should be white-collar, there was a need for more manual and semi-skilled work. JMT said that The Chamber was working with other organisations to address this issue. MG noted the KCC-backed Skill Centre at Senacre that was really doing nothing and that businesses needed to be involved in the process. There was also a need for volunteer Instructors.</p> <p>JMT thanked PM for attending the meeting and that he would be invited back to a Meeting at a later date. CD asked if there was any way that The Chamber could feed information into the process. PM said that he would supply contact details via JMT.</p>	
5.	<p><b>2012 OLYMPICS</b></p> <p>JF said that the event in Mote park was still being planned. JMT said that no information had been received from MBC for The Chamber to circulate, MG said that he would take on this issue.</p> <p>BM said that the Torch would pass through the Town at 6.40am on 20<sup>th</sup> July. There were currently 200 entries for the River Swim.</p> <p>JF said that the Town would be dressed from early in July and would remain until late September.</p>	
6.	<p><b>KENT FORUM HOUSING STRATEGY CONSULTATION</b></p> <p>The Consultation Document had been circulated prior to the Meeting. JMT felt that it was a wordy document that said very little and was very weak regarding the integration of economic growth and housing.</p> <p>AB said that it was impossible not to agree with the Document as it was all</p>	

	<p>common sense and was a regurgitation of other documents and policies. NR felt that lack of housebuilding was due to lack of profitability and that the UK should look at alternative methods of construction. MB said that she was aware of two companies wanting to start using pre-fabricated methods of construction but builders would not adopt these techniques as they believe that buyers do not want them. AB felt that Planning rules were making building more and more difficult.</p> <p>MG said that there was a need for more innovation in building methods, water collection for example, but the big building companies will not take this approach as there is no money in it. CB agreed that past failures, such as timber-frame buildings, have deterred their use in future developments. MG added that obtaining mortgages for buildings built with non-standard techniques could be difficult.</p>	
7.	<p><b>2012 &amp; BEYOND ROAD WORKS/CLOSURES WITHIN MAIDSTONE</b></p> <p>As the impact of the roadworks had not been as severe as expected, JMT asked the question that had occurred to others - "why not close Knightrider Street permanently?".</p> <p>BM said that footfall in the first week in April increased by over 8% and most retailers have seen an increase during the first three weeks of the work so people must be finding ways to get into Town. The YTD footfall figure was down 2.4% so not as catastrophic as many had expected.</p>	
8.	<p><b>MAIDSTONE CORE STRATEGY</b></p> <p>JF said that there had been hundreds of representations to the Consultation Process. A Red Line will be placed around certain areas in order to make clear the areas designated for certain purposes. From 17<sup>th</sup> August to 1<sup>st</sup> October there will be Consultation based on the allocation of strategic sites. Formal Consultation will be from 14<sup>th</sup> December to 1<sup>st</sup> February . The Strategy will then be published and formally adopted during 2013.</p> <p>MG said that there was a need to give certainty to developers and residents.</p>	
9.	<p><b>LSP UPDATE</b></p> <p>This is now the Locality Board. Nothing to report.</p>	
10.	<p><b>LEP UPDATE</b></p> <p>JF said that the LEP had called in The Highways Agency in order to discuss the Pinch Point Funds as M20 J7 is a potential candidate. The view of the Group was that the LEP was becoming more important and more relevant and that it would help the Group's understanding of the developing work of the LEP if JJ, as the Chamber representative on the LEP Board could be present at perhaps a couple of the Group's meetings during the year, as and when there is significant LEP developments to discuss which might impact on the Maidstone/Malling area in particular and also of course major matters affecting the Region as a whole.</p>	
11.	<p><b>CHAMBER UPDATE</b></p> <p>CD raised an issue on behalf of Chamber Members in the Printing Industry who had expressed a concern that recent developments at Maidstone Prison, also a Chamber Member, could result in the Prison undercutting commercial printers. CD passed on these concerns to JMT and also added that the Members concerned had written to Helen Grant MP. JMT said that this issue had not yet been taken to The Chamber Board but felt that as long as there was a level playing field that there ought to be no material problem. It was difficult for The Chamber to get involved as there was a need to be fair to all</p>	

	<p>parties.</p> <p>CD and BM both expressed a view that work was being tendered for at below Trade Price. It was also noted that the Prison do not advertise for work and all business is gained by word of mouth. Any work undertaken on behalf of the Prison Service itself or Government appears to be given priority over external work.</p> <p>The overall view of the Group was that there was a perceived problem and that there needed to be an independent audit of the financial issues. JMT agreed to raise the issue with the Chamber Board and to say that there was “an air of disquiet”.</p> <p>CD said that following the integration of the former Thames Gateway Chamber area that KICC was now one of the largest Chambers in the South East. There had been 120 new Members within the past year and a smaller number had been lost. Many new Members were from north of the M2 and new Members were also being obtained from the London area.</p> <p>JMT said that the loss of Members in the Maidstone area was lower than in other areas and that the main reason for loss of Members in the Maidstone area was due to “no benefit”. The Chamber overall still did not project itself very well.</p> <p>JMT also noted the level of activity in Export Documentation and this reflected an increase in International activity by The Chamber</p> <p>JMT said that The Chamber was still in the process of reviewing the areas covered by the EDGs.</p>	
12.	<p><b>AOB</b></p> <p>JF said that the recent Maidstone Businesses Transport Workshop would be part of a wider transport strategy. BM noted that a small number of business representatives attended the Workshop. JF agreed that perhaps the overall message was not right.</p> <p>JF said that the Jubilee Square opening would be held on 1<sup>st</sup> June.</p>	
	The meeting closed at 16:45.	
	<b>Date of Next Meeting: Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> July 2012.</b>	