

Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce Maidstone Economic Development Group

Minutes of Meeting held on Tuesday 11th September 2012
The Gatehouse, Archbishops Palace, Mill Street, Maidstone, ME15 6YE

Present: John Taylor(JMT, Chair); John Foster(JF), Victoria Wallace(VW), Anna Bloomfield(AB), Chris Blundell(CB), Mandy Bearne(MB), Rob Edwards(RE), Nick Rowell(NR), Julie Anderson(JA), Sarb Randhana(Maidstone JCP, Guest).

1.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE Jo James(JJ), Cllr Malcolm Greer(MG), Keith Grimley(KG), Colin Davies(CD), Bill Moss(BM), Allis Beasley(ABE), Alan Reading(AR), Steve Goulette(SG).</p>	
2.	<p>MINUTES OF LAST MEETING Approved.</p>	
3.	<p>MATTERS ARISING JMT said that he had now received details of the Spatial Planning Advisory Group. JMT reminded the Meeting that MEDG Minutes were only available to Chamber Members and were accessible via the Chamber Website. Anyone wishing to copy the Minutes to other parties should seek permission before doing so.</p>	
4.	<p>MAIDSTONE CORE STRATEGY JF gave a brief summary of the Strategy. There is a review of timetables & objectives and this should resolve uncertainty over strategic sites as well as pre-empting planning applications from developers. The strategy covers housing & employment allocations. The Consultation period ends on 1st October and this will be followed by a review. The status of any Representations can be checked on the MBC Website. The next stage of the Strategy will be published on 14th December. JMT said that he wished to split the discussion between Employment & Housing aspects and would start with comments relating to Employment. VW expressed a concern that the focus was on warehousing & similar with little regard to creative businesses. JMT said that the existing economy in Maidstone was OK but what type of employment was required in the next 20 years? Should it be warehousing or Eclipse Park style development and does the existing Strategy document clarify this? VW said that greater clarification was needed due to traffic impact and it was important that the Transport Strategy matched the development of employment. JMT agreed that this was a very valid point as there was already a serious problem at J8. JF observed that the document had to be read alongside the Transport Strategy document but if the MEDG did not feel that this was sufficient then the point should be made. NR said that the Town Centre was thriving and that retail, entertainment & professional services had been behind the recent growth in Maidstone and had buoyed it against the downturn. Why not build on this success, supported by development of creative and tourist industries? JF said that 70% of commercial activity was in the Town Centre yet there was plenty of vacant Office space in the Centre and at Springfield & Eclipse. The Maidstone economy is diverse, as is the workforce. Industrial Estates are well occupied and expansion is difficult for many businesses. There was also the National emphasis on manufacturing to be considered. It was right to be wary of the</p>	

impact of development at J7 on the Town Centre.

VW was concerned that any J8 development would impact on Tourism collateral such as, for example, gastropubs & 4-star hotels. JMT commented that other than J8 there was little land available.

CB congratulated JF as his commentary was much clearer than any of the Council documents. He felt that the documents lacked vision & ambition and there had to be concern regarding further Public Sector cuts. He was now a fan of development at J7 and felt that no land at J8 should be sacrosanct although Leeds Castle and its environs should not be compromised. Whilst employment rates are high, jobs have been lost in the local economy since the start of the recession and KCC forecast 2000 public sector job losses in Maidstone by 2015.

JMT said that future growth would not be in the Public Sector and wondered what the market required as there had been examples of Companies wishing to locate in Maidstone and being unable to find suitable floorspace. JF said that there was competition from Ashford, Thames Gateway and Kings Hill in terms of floorspace provision. JMT believed that many businesses did not wish to go as far as Ashford, many wished to locate in Maidstone, notably at J7. The question is how does Maidstone cater for this and does the Chamber support development at J7 & J8?

MB said that any town that does not plan for growth will actually shrink. The balance of demand versus availability in the Maidstone & Aylesford areas was very tight & that something had to be done.

AB said that incremental development would result in there being no infrastructure development and that funding of infrastructure was a real problem. JF responded that Growing Places funding was being addressed in conjunction with KCC & LEP but any projects had to be do-able within a two to three year timeframe. AB added that river crossings were a major problem.

CB asked if developments would be related to the areas of unemployment in the Town as these would be a potential source of employees. This also related to transport issues. JMT said that the MEDG has always maintained that employment & housing developments were inter-related.

NR said that the Town Centre and J7 retail developments had to have different characteristics in order to avoid directly competing.

The discussion then moved on to the housing aspect of the Strategy. JMT raised the questions of what was being proposed, at what locations and how would this relate to the Town Centre and new areas of development?

CB said that employment & housing go together and that transport is the glue. He noted that the 2011 Census had shown changes in household structures and that prior knowledge of these changes would have resulted in 1,000 extra homes being added to the housing target.

JMT that there were currently more than 1,300 unbuilt consents, 60% of which were for development of flats. The majority of these were no longer financially viable.

Other issues which were highlighted during the discussion included the political issues relating to development to the North-West of the Town as much of the area falls adjacent to Tonbridge & Malling; problems arising from the confusion in National Policy; urban sprawl; provision of school places and infrastructure issues, particularly in the rural areas.

It was agreed that CB would produce a draft submission on behalf of MEDG which would be circulated to the Group for review prior to sending to MBC.

5.	<p>MAIDSTONE INTEGRATED TRANSPORT STRATEGY</p> <p>JMT noted that some observations relevant to this topic had been made in the previous item and that submissions had to be made by 1st October.</p> <p>VW said that the Southern Strategic Link Road was still an issue.</p> <p>AB commented that the document did not appear to represent a strategy, just ad-hoc tinkering. JMT agreed that there was no vision for the future and that three issues were not addressed; the gyratory system, eastern & western relief roads joining south of the Town and the M20 Junctions.</p> <p>RE said that he would put a response document together and circulate to the Group for comments.</p> <p>JMT noted that any proposed strategy needed to be deliverable & not simply represent a wish list as had been the case with the All Saints Relief Road.</p> <p>The overall view of the Meeting was that the document did not offer a strategy, was not well presented, did not quantify the benefits of any of the proposals and demonstrated a lack of consultation.</p>	
6.	<p>LOCAL ECONOMY UPDATE</p> <p>NR said that the latest quarterly survey period had finished on the previous day. He reported that anecdotal information suggested that many businesses were ceasing trading. 25% of Chamber Members were reported to be struggling although this was better than the national figure of 33%.</p>	
7.	<p>KENT FORUM HOUSING STRATEGY CONSULTATION</p> <p>The Consultation is now closed and further information is awaited.</p>	
8.	<p>ROAD WORKS/CLOSURES WITHIN MAIDSTONE</p> <p>The current understanding is that the works are running to schedule.</p>	
9.	<p>LOCALITY BOARD UPDATE</p> <p>JMT said that he would be attending the next meeting on 1st October although there was no agenda available to date. It is anticipated that Broadband will be on the agenda as Maidstone is second on the list for Kent; Tunbridge Wells being first.</p>	
10.	<p>LEP UPDATE</p> <p>The next LEP Board Meeting is scheduled for October. An update will be available at the November MEDG Meeting.</p>	
11.	<p>CHAMBER UPDATE</p> <p>CD left a note to say that following a recent meeting with SG that the Chamber was promoting & supporting MBC's first Business Breakfast which will be held at the Museum on 25th October. All local businesses, including Chamber Members, will be invited to this free event and it is hoped that it will complement the Chamber Event programme and become a regular quarterly Event.</p> <p>JMT said that there was nothing to report concerning Business Incubation Centres and that developments were awaited from KCC and Mid-Kent College. JA said that she had been involved with a similar development at Thanet College and believed that Cornwallis was also interested.</p>	
12.	<p>AOB</p> <p>JMT asked if details of the Maidstone Integrated Parking Strategy, one of the inputs to the Transport Strategy, were available. JF said that he would check and circulate details as available.</p>	
	<p>The meeting closed at 16:50.</p>	

Date of Next Meeting: Tuesday 13th November 2012.