

**Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce**  
**Ashford Economic Development Group**

Minutes of an ordinary meeting of the AEDG held at Ashford College on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2024 at 8.30am.

| <b>PRESENT</b>                             | <b>NAME</b>                              | <b>POSITION</b> |
|--|--|-----------------|
|  | Nettie Buss (AB)                         | Chair           |
|  | Jo Brown (JB)                            |                 |
|  | Maria Callow (MC)                        |                 |
|  | Lee Collette (LC)                        |                 |
|  | Steve Garnett (SG)                       |                 |
|  | Richard Lavender (RL)                    |                 |
|  | Sharon Norman (SN)                       |                 |
|  | Andrew Osborne (AO)                      |                 |
|  | Tudor Price (TP)                         |                 |
|  | Jason Rainbird (JR)                      |                 |
|  | Tom Shaw-Dunn (TS-D)                     |                 |
|  | Tim Sheppard (TS)                        |                 |
|  | Dan Sherlock (DS)                        |                 |
|  | Richard Stafford (RS)                    |                 |
| <b>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE RECEIVED FROM</b> | Susan Bonett (SB)<br>Peter Heritage (PH) |                 |

**1. NOTICE AND QUORUM**

The chair reported that enough notice of the meeting had been duly given and that a quorum was present. The chair declared that the meeting was open at 8.30am.

**2. APPROVAL OF PRIOR MINUTES**

Minutes of the board meeting held on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2024 had already been approved. The chair had been authorised to sign them as a complete record of the relevant meeting.

**3. ANY MATTERS ARISING/PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Ashford Picturehouse lease will be assigned to Ashford Cinema Limited (ACL).

**4. BUSINESS OF THE MEETING**

**Welcome**

AB welcomed guests Jo Brown (Assistant Principal, Ashford College) and Tom Shaw-Dunn, CEO of Retainagroup.

## **Update on Ashford College**

### Growth

JB discussed the success of the new building to help accommodate 200 more students. The college is looking for a higher intake in September 2024 and looking ahead to phase 3 development.

TS asked what has contributed to the college's growth - since 2020 when it opened it has had a 46% growth in students. JB believed it is attributed to Ashford College becoming the college of choice, the reputation has been elevated. Less local students are travelling to Canterbury, more travelling from Maidstone and they have worked on extensive community outreach.

### Placements

The college has a model F1 track that will be displayed at the Ashford Designer Outlet to help attract and engage with potential engineering students, staff and potential placement opportunities.

However, a key challenge is to secure Level 2 Electrical and Plumbing placements for the students – currently only 10% secured. There are hurdles to overcome but the college has a fund to help secure new placements.

TP will discuss how the chamber can help with ILO's and potentially consider and AB will consider an open invite to a future AEDG meeting.

### Phased development

The college has a further challenge to secure space for creative media production students. TP will further investigate a potential opportunity at KICC and the college is already in discussion with the council.

There was discussion about engaging with Stagecoach to increase number of services from the Romney Marsh area to support students, RL will action.

DS asked about expansion planning for phase 3 onwards and JB and AO confirmed options were being investigated to develop local land with the council.

### Skills

TP mentioned the 'Youth Skills Manifesto' and how the chamber and businesses can align and support local young people into work.

TP also stated there are 75,000 businesses in Kent and by 2035 there will be a need for 56,000 more skilled workers. But in line with economic growth this equates to 478,000 skilled people by 2035. There is a huge skills transition ahead for the county.

AO referenced Coty as an example of where technology has moved on considerably and they have higher skilled staff to run a more productive, automated process.

## **Eurotunnel initiative**

TP referred to a recent meeting with Getlink who are exploring the opportunity of a £42m plan to convert the rail freight route from the Folkestone Terminal to Wembley via Redhill. The plan is to upgrade the route to a more modern freight loading gauge – to take 40% freight off the road.

There was discussion around using the existing Eurostar line up to the Thames Crossing. Next steps will be for TP to share opinions with Getlink.

**British Chamber of Commerce (BCC)**

Discussion around the benefits of sharing BCC documents on a regular basis. Following the Chancellors budget statement, TP fed back that the policy requests made via BCC had originated from the Ashford and other EDGs across the UK.

Two notable requests and wins were firstly around changes to the planning delays which led to the Government match funding our £3m BCC/Aviva skills fund for local planners.

And secondly, a freeze on tax breaks for the film and digital production industries which again arose from the Newtown Works planning.

TP endorsed EDGs play a vital role in helping to shape the larger policy asks made by BCC and this recent example is a testament to that good work.

**5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

TS suggested to invite Nick Shaw, General Manager of The Stour Centre to the next meeting. NB agreed.

RL mentioned attending a meeting about the forward plan to reposition the Northern Runway at Gatwick airport to accommodate more passengers.

RL will also be attending a public meeting at EDF Dungeness on 18<sup>th</sup> April to assess the future possibilities of the site and the use of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs). SMRs could offer the potential for nuclear regeneration in Dungeness to continue.

RL also mentioned bp pulse has acquired Ashford International Truckstop. They have ambitious plans to install mega-watt EV chargers for HGVs to establish a Europe-wide network.

RL discussed an employment skills sub group to focus on ex-service people in Kent to help them be upskilled to find work opportunities.

**6. CLOSE**

AB thanked everyone for their continued support.

Date of next meeting - 8.30am, 18<sup>th</sup> April 2024 at Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce.

There was no further business and therefore the chair declared that the meeting was closed at 10.05am.

.....Chair – Nettie Buss - Date