



## Press Release

### Chamber Question Time

At the invitation of the Dover District Chamber of Commerce, companies from a wide range of sectors attended Chamber Question Time in St Mary's Church Hall in Dover on the evening of 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018.

In contrast to the national issues which dominate the BBC version, Chamber Question Time concentrated on local issues of genuine interest to any firm trading in the area.

Under the chairmanship of Chamber of Commerce Chief Executive David Foley, the CQT panel consisted of the following business experts: Tom Stokes, former Chairman of the Business Centre Association and Managing Director of Evans Easyspace; Harry Kemp, chartered accountant with over 200 companies in his portfolio; Rob Prince, Commercial Director of CGI plc with extensive investments in the Dover area; Phil Inglis, outgoing district valuer at the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) which sets business rates in Kent; David Otteson, hotelier with a background in tourism and retail.

Opening the session, David Foley thanked Dover District Council for its assistance in organising the evening and St Mary's Church for allowing the use of its large hall for the occasion.

The first question, "How important is our culture and history in supporting the local economy?", drew a unanimous response from the panel who all emphasised Dover's important and unique position as the main gateway to Britain for most road users and the attraction of its heritage assets. The latest reports show that tourism directly supports over 4,500 jobs in the district and has a business impact approaching £300 million per year. Although voted the best English Heritage site for family days out, Dover Castle is not the only local heritage site and mention was made of Dover's bronze-age boat, the world's oldest sea-going vessel, the Drop Redoubt and St Mary's Church. The panel noted the importance of encouraging overnight stays which increased the per person spend significantly.

More contentious were the questions concerning business rates. The effect of the St James development on High Street retailers has yet to be realised, but there were some heartfelt concerns from the High Street businesses represented.

Not every panellist was enamoured with the current Check And Challenge service in operation since 1 April 2017 which provides non-domestic ratepayers with a route to question the level of business rates levied on their commercial properties. Nonetheless, a clear explanation of the role and responsibilities of the VOA provided much needed clarity and will undoubtedly help prevent spurious appeals.

Although comments on individual cases had to wait for a private interview at the end of the evening, most of the panellists agreed that the current levels of business rates discriminate against High Street retailers. The recent difficulties experienced by New Look, Toys r Us, Maplin, Prezzo, Byron and House of Fraser would clearly have been less onerous if their standing costs had been reduced and the same applies to smaller shops, restaurants and offices in Dover.

Some of the panel pointed to the unfair advantages of on-line companies such as Amazon who fish in our waters but contribute little to maintain our stocks or support the local community. Whereas all the panellists agreed that the government needed to receive tax receipts to sustain and improve public services, there was some dispute over whether a more equitable tax system would provide a fairer link between work, efficiency and reward.

One radical proposal was for business rates to be replaced entirely by a corporate tax based on turnover earned in the UK which would mean the likes of Starbucks, Google and Amazon would be obliged to pay more and local businesses less.

A question on the housing shortage brought a spirited response from the panel. It was felt that national legislation impacted unjustly on Dover which plays such a vital role in the national economy. Plans for extensive public works on Western Heights and new houses at Farthingloe, ideally suited to attract homeowners with money to spend, were still awaiting resolution. Despite the solid support of Dover District Council and extensive investment funds available from private developers, a planning delay of seven years to date has meant that a new 130-bedroom hotel, a state-of-the-art care home and over 500 houses had not yet received planning permission.

The panel was in agreement that good quality housing was essential to attract inward investment and encourage firms to locate in the area. As with business rates, the government should give more attention to reducing the regulatory burdens on local companies and less attention to pie-in-the-sky projects such as a cross-channel bridge.

Lively interaction with the audience provided a spirited debate on many other issues of local interest leading to the conclusion that the event should be repeated later in the year and open to even more companies keen to express their views on ways to boost business in and around Dover.

Before closing the session, David Foley thanked Dover District Council for its support for the evening and joined the generous applause for the contributions of the members of the panel.

After discussions the next day with some of the company owners attending, David Foley said: ““The Dover district promises to be attractive location for businesses. The huge investment taking place across the District is creating new opportunities for SMEs in both the retail sector and the supply chain. We are keen to help local enterprises to tap into this growth agenda by providing practical support and advice.”

“There is little doubt that the local economy is being stimulated by new investment at Discovery Park, the Port of Dover and the St James leisure and retail development. With 14,000 homes scheduled to be built in the next few years, there is every prospect of a healthy commercial outlook for companies of all sizes.”

Cllr Keith Morris, Leader of Dover District Council, said: “This was a great opportunity for local SMEs to hear from a panel of business professionals. There was plenty of practical suggestions about business rates relief, flexible leases on property to encourage entrepreneurs to give retailing a try, and the importance of new homes to stimulate housing growth.”

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## **Information**

Dover District Chamber of Commerce was established in 1850 and provides professional business support to the private and voluntary sector. In liaison with its sister body, Thanet & East Kent Chamber, the Dover District Chamber of Commerce operates the East Kent Business Advice Clinic which gives commercial guidance to companies of all sizes trading in East Kent.

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## **External Websites**

English Heritage:                      [www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/familydaysout/top-10-family-days-out](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/familydaysout/top-10-family-days-out)  
VOA Check & Challenge:              [www.gov.uk/guidance/how-to-check-your-rateable-value-is-correct](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/how-to-check-your-rateable-value-is-correct)  
Dover District Council:                [www.dover.gov.uk/Business/Business.aspx](http://www.dover.gov.uk/Business/Business.aspx)  
Bronze-age boat:                        [www.dovermuseum.co.uk/bronze-age-boat/bronze-age-boat.aspx](http://www.dovermuseum.co.uk/bronze-age-boat/bronze-age-boat.aspx)  
St James Development:                [www.stjamesdover.co.uk](http://www.stjamesdover.co.uk)