

Budget 2018: ‘The chancellor spoke of a jobs miracle. No sign of that here’

James Hurley, Enterprise Editor

Dover is on the Brexit front line, handling about 17 per cent of the nation’s trade in goods. There are fears that delays at the port in processing lorries will effectively cut the town off in the event of a no-deal exit from the European Union but other concerns weigh on locals too, including poverty, a declining high street and cuts to public services. The Times asks if the budget has come to their rescue



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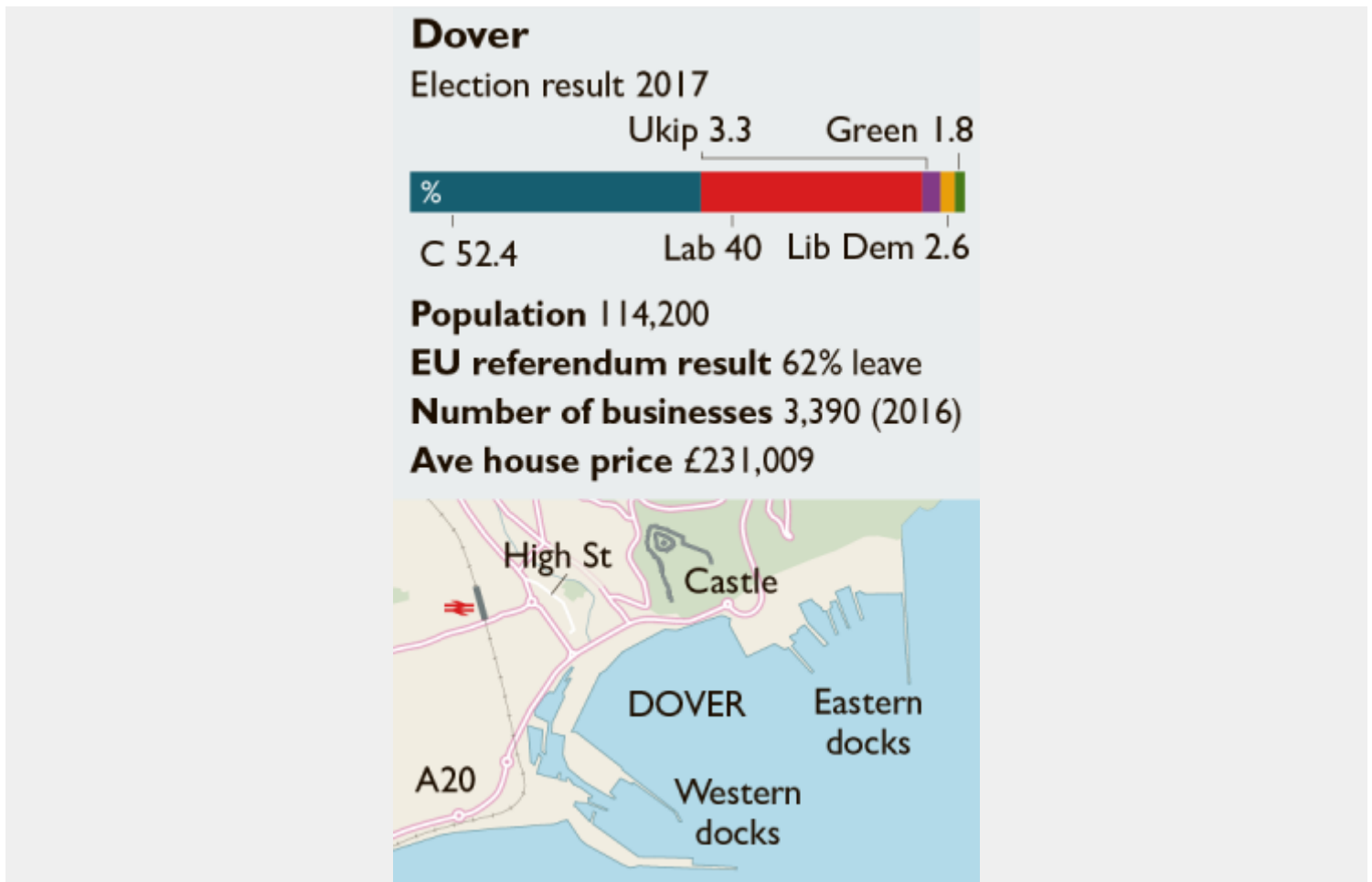
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Victoria Copp-Crawley

Principal, East Kent College

Deep concerns about the impact of spending cuts on the education system have been eased by the chancellor’s promise to bring austerity to an end, Ms Copp-Crawley says.

“In terms of austerity we have had eight years of flat funding in further education with rising cost pressures, so it has been really tough. With the full spending review next year it was very encouraging to hear the chancellor’s pledges.”



The 38-year-old mother welcomed support for children in care. “We have a lot of children in care in the college, and that extra financial support for those young people is absolutely critical for us. It really does make a difference.”

She also supported help for small companies to take on apprentices. “It allows so many more of our students to enter apprenticeships — we’ve got a large drive in construction across the whole of our group. [Having more small company employers] is critical for us, so we can provide those destinations for students who go into industry and address those skills gaps.”

Ms Copp-Crawley says that her attention will now turn to what the Treasury delivers in next year’s spending review. “We have had to make cuts at the college, do things differently. We’ve had to be quite innovative with what we’re doing. Hopefully with the spending review next year, things will be easier for us.

“We still continue to work with our local employers to make sure we’re offering the right curriculum to our local community, making sure that we’re supporting young people.



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George Rusiecki

Retired fisherman

The former fisherman and air traffic controller says that while he was pleased with certain measures, the budget left him feeling “underwhelmed”.

“It was a lot of talk but we’re yet to see the action. The chancellor spoke of a jobs miracle. Well, that’s not reflected down here in Dover, that’s for sure,” he said.

Mr Rusiecki, 56, feels that instead of Brexit contingency money going to government departments it would have been better invested in infrastructure projects such as upgrading Kent’s dormant Manston airport, which is subject to contentious redevelopment plans. He questioned the value of the £12 million to support the fishing industry. “I’ve seen boats that cost that much. With Brexit around the corner it was a missed opportunity,” he says.

Mr Rusiecki is sceptical about Philip Hammond’s claims that “austerity is coming to an end” and that more funding is needed for English councils to improve public services.

He welcomed the additional £1 billion for the Ministry of Defence but said that it “won’t go very far”. He also supported the intention to help embattled high streets in the form of business rates relief. “That will help small businesses a little, but it’s nothing vast. I was surprised to hear him talk about turning under-used retail and commercial areas into residential ones as a way of saving the high street. I thought ‘hang on a minute, that won’t help!’.”



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Tony Thompson

Haulier

As someone who runs a shop in Dover and a small haulage company that makes daily runs to France, Tony Thompson says that the town centre needs government help. He suspects that the chancellor's assistance for small retailers in the form of business rates assistance will make little difference. "The high street has been in decline and will always be so now because of online shopping. You're not going to put a stop to that," he says.

Mr Thompson, 58, had hoped for action from the government to tackle technology giants who make significant amounts of money from British consumers but pay little tax. He says he is not convinced by the planned "digital services tax", which Philip Hammond said would capture some of the "UK-generated revenues of specific digital platform business models" from April 2020. "It's not coming straight away. There's nothing definite, just a consultation," Mr Thompson says.

Overall, he feels that the budget is "pretty weak". "It's nice to see more money going to the NHS, but there is the provision that it is contingent on the outcome of Brexit negotiations. It's good to see them putting a stop on new PFI [private finance initiative] projects, but there are still plenty of projects going on."

With clients ranging from a French hotel group to a Japanese pharmaceuticals company, Mr Thompson wonders if disruption to Dover after Brexit could disrupt his haulage business, but he remains sanguine. "I'm pragmatic, I sit back and see what happens."



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Samantha Gurney

Estate agent

The owner of an independent estate agents was hoping to see support for the self-employed.

“Starting up is so expensive. I had my first pay day on July 13, I’ve been paying out since October last year,” Ms Gurney says.

As such, she is pleased to see help for small and medium-sized companies to hire staff in the form of a discount on their national insurance bills. “That will help me in the future, as I’m just getting to that stage as a start-up. I’m reaching the point where I’m ready to employ people.”

A former police sergeant, Ms Gurney, 48, is also encouraged by the £160 million of funding for counterterrorism and a review of broader police spending power. “The extra money is long overdue, but there also needs to be a review of police spending. They need to have people in the police who have business experience and know how to spend the money properly.

“There has been a massive resistance to the idea that superintendents could be recruited from business, but actually when you’re operating at that level it’s necessary. I think the police service would be richer for it.”

She is optimistic about additional funds to revive flagging high streets and to support small retailers.

“Money for the high street is long overdue, especially in Dover. I’ve seen the decline of the high street over 20 years, and all the empty shops. But I’ve been working for myself for less than a year and it’s the best decision I’ve made, business-wise.”



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David Foley

Chamber of Commerce

Talk of this being a “giveaway” budget irritates the chief executive of Thanet & East Kent Chamber of Commerce.

“Before the budget, [Philip Hammond] said he had the fiscal firepower. But it’s our money, not his money. The majority of the business sector would rather that he didn’t take it from us in the first place.”

Mr Foley, 65, concedes that the final pre-Brexit budget does have a few “interesting features” that he could get behind, including £420 million for repairing roads, much of which he would like to see spent locally — particularly with fears of disruption in Dover if a Brexit deal cannot be agreed.

“That will do well for Kent, frankly, because as 17 per cent of the UK’s trading goods pass through Dover, then of course, £420 million is probably about the sum we need in Kent. The bicycle brigade say everything should be spent on public transport, but that would be double the cost. Try transporting two tonnes of baked beans to three supermarkets by bicycle. We’ve got to have our roads working well.”



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Robert Najem

Commercial director

The 31-year-old former footballer works for Barnard Systems, a manufacturer of modular and prefabricated houses that aims to make the construction process simpler, faster and cheaper. Mr Najem is pleased to hear about more help for housing, including £500 million to support the construction of 650,000 homes. However, he says: “The problem we have is not so much the financing, but the process. It can take us up to four years to get planning permission and by that time the whole market’s changed.”

He is sceptical about whether government help will get through to smaller companies such as Barnard that may offer something different to the large housebuilders. “Affordable housing funds have traditionally been placed in the hands of traditional businesses and organisations which have not been able to deliver. We will be stretched unless we support innovative businesses.”

He welcomes the thrust of the chancellor’s speech, though. “The general theme was that austerity has come to an end, which is a relief for everyone. There was a feelgood factor, but it’s not clear how it’s all going to transpire in benefits for the consumer.

“I saw the PFI measures. The government is arguing that PFI schemes didn’t generate value for the taxpayer; and the problem was the risk wasn’t being transferred to the private sector. The government needs to run more like a business and be more proactive.”



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Jamie Weir

College worker

“I’m that generation that can’t afford a house,” says the 35-year-old, who rents a property in Deal. He is a former local newspaper journalist for *Kent on Sunday* and the *Gravesend Reporter* and now works in communications for a vocational college.

He was hoping for more assistance for young people to get on the property ladder. “We’ve got pretty high prices down here because we’re on the doorstep of London and Europe,” he says.

From a professional point of view he welcomed signs of an end to austerity because it could mean improved funding for colleges.

“There was the feeling that there’s growth and opportunities coming: not necessarily right now, but it sounded like there was positivity on the horizon,” he says. Mr Weir also supported the chancellor’s commitment to provide more resources to “end the stigma” around mental health and to tackle the “tragedy of too many lives lost to suicide”.

“Mental ill health is a really significant issue for young people,” he says. “The additional boost to the NHS is going to be a positive move, particularly the 24-hour crisis hotline. It’s about building resilience in young people, which is good.