

Channel Chamber AGM

21st November 2008

Statement from Ray Johnson,

Channel Chamber Chairman



In my role as Chairman of your Chamber, I am delighted to summarise for you the main events of the past year, to express my personal thanks to all those who have helped so much, and to remind us all of the challenges ahead.

Let me turn to the Chamber's activities in the past year. As you know, Channel Chamber regularly reviews and recommends positions on a host of new policy initiatives, regulatory changes and plans for the future. We are very fortunate in being able to draw on the talent and expertise that a number of our members willingly provide. As a result of these contributions, our Chamber's views are listened to (not always agreed with but at least listened to), both within our local authority, national Government and amongst the community at large. We take this responsibility very seriously.

As an excellent example of this, and with considerable feedback from members, the Chamber engaged with Shepway District Council on the tricky issue of parking controls in Folkestone. We have worked together with local partners (Folkestone Town Centre Partnership, Folkestone, Hythe and District Hotel & Catering Association and the Federation of Small Businesses to present a co-ordinated business voice. These plans are now on hold, many of our ideas have been accepted and we will continue to play a key role.

This has been a very busy year at the Chamber. In our efforts to keep members informed and to broaden discussion of policy issues we launched a weekly email newsletter "The Insider" to complement our monthly paper newsletter. We have also held high level discussions with local businesses on such diverse subjects as the environment, waste reduction, planning, human resource management and healthcare.

The year also saw an interesting speech when we hosted the Chief Treasurer for HSBC at a busy breakfast in February entitled "Is Recession Looming?" No-one could have predicted what turbulence was to come in the financial markets in the last six months.

The credit crunch and economic downturn now dominate all our activities. We are working on initiatives to assist our members. Local businessmen and women in all sectors seem to be doing quite well, but we are keen to assist everyone through a period of low growth and uncertainty.

Our monthly breakfast meetings continue to be popular and we have also held a couple of evening networking events. All these events are posted on our web site, and, if you have not checked it out recently, I urge you to take a look. In addition to our event programme, we have also researched and conducted a number of surveys including the Quarterly Economic Survey for the BCC Nationally and various transport and planning surveys.

Our Business Awards Dinner in April was fully booked again and we duly celebrated the achievements of the winning businesses and their personnel. Two of these, Wayne Hodgson and African Experience (Lympne Wild Life Park) have since achieved regional awards and are now entered in the National Finals of the BCC Business Awards. We were back at the Leas Cliff hall in full force again in September for our Annual Business-to-Business show, which despite challenging economic conditions was successful.

A new partnership agreement with Thanet Chamber of Commerce was signed in February and this has since opened up many opportunities for our respective members to work and network together across East Kent. Coincidentally, a new local strategic alliance has also been created across the East Kent area, led by the four local authorities and Kent County Council. Channel Chamber was

invited to join the Board of the East Kent LSP and is now working with other key partners to improve the prosperity of the area.

Channel Chamber also retains its membership of the Shepway LSP (Shepway Community Partnership) where we work closely with senior representatives from the Police, Primary Care Trust, Educational Authority and Shepway District Council to improve our own District's future prospects.

Perhaps one of our most active and rewarding challenges has been the role we have played in establishing the Shepway Economic Regeneration Partnership, otherwise known as SERP. Encouraged by the Chamber, our members have been the driving force behind this initiative whilst our Chief Executive sits on each of the four sub-groups as well as providing admin support.

The European funded, Transmanche Technology project, with partners in Medway and Boulogne has successfully supported 100 businesses (including 50 Chamber members) and encouraged them to build relationships with business partners in northern France. More locally, on this industrial estate, the Safer Business Park project has allowed us to organise a series of meetings to deal with crime issues and a survey of business park users, the results of which were passed up to SEEDA. Our Young Chamber scheme at Dover Grammar School for Boys and in partnership with Dover District Chamber organised a wide range of events and activities designed to increase the employability and entrepreneurship of young people. We also took part in Shepway's Enterprise Day at the new University Centre Folkestone with students from 5 local secondary schools.

Although not relevant to the last financial year, it seems important to highlight our campaign, earlier this year to claim back small business rate relief on behalf of our members in Shepway. Through these efforts we helped our members to realise savings of over £85,000 - a magnificent result!

You may also have noticed some changes to Peter's team. Since the last AGM, sadly, Pam Robinson retired to spend more time with her family. We also lost Emma Walton, Kelly Stone and Sezen Zeki - all of whom left to join different Chamber members. We had no idea we were running a recruitment service!

Tracy Reynolds joined the team in 2007, a graduate from our own Women into Management training programme and we have also appointed Matt Lacy as membership advisor and I am sure many of you have met him at our networking meetings.

A special vote of thanks needs to go to Caroline and Peter who continue to manage this small but very proactive team most successfully. With their enthusiasm and dedication and supported by the Chamber Board, we will continue to speak out on behalf of our members, our society and our belief that businesses along the Channel Coast are something special.

In closing, I would like to extend an open invitation to members to raise at any time your own ideas and suggestions with Peter and his team, and I would like to wish you and your businesses every success in the year ahead.

Ray Johnson
Chairman (21.11.2008)