

**Draft Minutes for the Kent & Medway Business Advisory Board (BAB) Meeting**  
**Online 14 March 2024**

The Business Advisory Board meets quarterly and provides an insight from the business community in Kent and Medway on current trading conditions. The headline points are presented below, and the full meeting note follows.

**Highlights from economic commentary and wider discussions**

**Challenges/Ambitions/Updates:**

- Although there is an increasing sense of optimism among companies, there is a real **need for stability and certainty**.
- The imminent general election is a cause of uncertainty. However **staffing pressures and inflationary pressures seem to be easing**.
- Recent results from **the International Rail Survey** suggest the vast majority and businesses would like to see the return of services stopping in Kent once more. BAB members were keen to support a case being made to government and potential operators to support the return of services.
- The **Entry/Exit System** is due to be implemented from 6 October 6 2024, and this could have significant impacts for Kent businesses (employee travel, supply chains, deliveries and lost revenue etc.). Most businesses at the meeting had not previously understood the risks to business continuity in Kent but agreed that managing messaging to avoid reputational damage to the county was essential.
- **Nutrient Neutrality** continues to be an issue to be resolved but a recent government funding allocation to the Kent catchment area should ease the challenges.
- Several Businesses mentioned their positive involvement with the **B Corps Accreditation Scheme** and the benefit this had on their business and clients.

**Actions:**

- BAB members are invited to respond to the current public and stakeholder engagement exercise to input into the new [Port of Dover master plan to 2050](#).
- BAB Members to provide suggestions for new Members that could address the current gaps in membership.
- A note for future BAB meetings it would be useful to know what other counties are doing on relevant topics (benchmarking)
- Steve Samson to update BAB on the development of KPIs for the Kent & Medway Economic Framework

**DRAFT MINUTES**

**Participants:**

<b>Transport &amp; Logistics:</b>	Paul Barrett Ltd, Barretts of Canterbury Matthew Arnold, Stagecoach Josh Fenton, Logistics UK Vince Lucas, VA Rail
<b>Agri-food:</b>	Claire Eckley, NFU Kent & Eckley Farms Mario Caccamo, NIAB EMR
<b>Digital, Creative, Media:</b>	Andrew Metcalf, Maxim PR Jo Nolan, Screen South Tom Chown, Digitom
<b>Construction / Property services:</b>	Roland Cooper, Considine Harry Jackson, Quinn Estates Alex Hicken, DHA Planning;

	Ashley Hook, MHS homes group Nick Fenton, Kent Developers Group Chair
<b>Financial &amp; Professional Services:</b>	Daren Rose, Lloyds Bank Samantha Mason, MBM Balance Ltd Emma Liddiard, Spurling Cannon Accountants Salim Somjee, Cripps LLP Marion Brookes, Apogee
<b>Life Science/ Health</b>	Karl Hudson, KIMS Chris Broom, Discovery Park
<b>Business Support</b>	Tudor Price, Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce Martin Prentice, IoD
<b>Others/Observers</b>	Steve Samson, KCC Emma Watson, KCC Natasha White, KCC Stephanie Holt Castle, KCC David Smith, KCC Mark Welch, KCC

#### **Apologies:**

Derek Murphy (Cabinet Member for Economic Development, KCC), Anne Knight (Medway Council), Carol Ford (Fresh Food Taskforce), Miranda Chapman (Pillory Barn), Liz Gibney (Lee Evans Partnership), Iain Hawthorn (Oxbury Bank), Karl Eliot (Clague LLP), Kanagaratnam Rajamenon (Leaf Hotels), Gaurav Malhotra (Goaco), Simon Storey (Kent Cricket), Richard Hall (Trenport Holdings), Karl Elliot (Clague LLP).

#### **1. Welcome**

Liz Gibney was unable to attend due to illness, therefore Vince Lucas (KMEP Vice Chair) welcomed everyone and approved the minutes from the previous meeting. Steve Samson provided a quick update on previous meeting actions.

#### **2. General Update and Key Points for 2024**

Steve Samson provided an update on the following topics:

- **Kent & Medway Economic Framework**
  - **Event:** [Medway Business and Skills Showcase](#) (10 April, MidKent College, Gillingham)
  - **Planning approval granted for spa hotel and surf lagoon at Betteshanger country park** - includes a fully funded management plan for the park's wildlife
  - Letter sent from BAB to Kent MPs outlining concerns about '**Border Target Operating Model**' for the Fresh Produce sector
  - **Skills Bootcamps** – views welcome on potential content, topics and sector needs
- 
- Marion Brooks asked if the Skills Bootcamps training would be held online. Steve Samson responded that they would be bespoke and a combination of online and face to face. He added that Kent and Medway were underrepresented for this programme nationally.
  - Jo Nolan asked about the timeframe and has been talking to other counties and commented that it was a very good programme. Steve Samson said he would find out more shortly.
  - Tudor Price commented on the work around the Local Skills Improvement Plan and that it would be good to coordinate and join up on this as there is quite a bit of data and some interested parties already.

#### **Current Consultations:**

**'Not for EU' labelling for retail products across Great Britain**

The government is legislating to confirm that labelling requirements on agrifood products are applied across Great Britain, to ensure no incentive arises for businesses to avoid placing goods on the Northern Ireland market. This [consultation](#) is seeking views **by 15 March** on plans to introduce the requirement for 'not for EU' labels on retail products across England, Scotland & Wales.

[Cyber security and economic growth: call for views](#) - The McPartland Review of Cyber Security & Economic Growth is seeking views **by 28 March** and evidence to inform its work, supporting the government to make the most of the opportunities digital technology could provide for the public and the economy.

**Port of Dover 2050** a 6-week public engagement period until 31<sup>st</sup> March, to hear from local communities, visitors, Port users and wider stakeholders on the outcomes and ideas they think the Port should pursue to 2050.

**ACTION:** If BAB members would like to respond and test possible outcomes and ideas for change. There is an online form here [Have Your Say Today - Port Of Dover 2050 | Empower Exchange - Commonplace](#).

- Tudor Price commented that KICC is working with the University of Kent, who are currently bidding to become a centre of excellence for cyber security and there are a few things underway. It would be interesting to link up on the wider piece of the consultation as well.
- Tudor Price went on to provide an update on the latest **Government Budget announcements**:
  - In terms of key asks the Chamber didn't do too badly and in terms of the political life cycle and the pending election, there were a number of things that were not yet included.
  - Tudor Price is of the view that the budget did not provide anything particular to move the dial on the current situation.
  - Economically, many businesses that the Chamber are talking to are still in a bit of a precarious situation. There is some optimism that stability may return which could encourage investment.
  - But for that investment to be made, there needs to be some significant decision making made by the government, whichever is in power, to make sure that the confidence is there to get those wheels moving.
  - The Chamber asked for the VAT threshold to be changed. When you start to look at the detail behind it, most of the VAT revenue comes from a small percentage of large employers. So, by shifting that threshold, that won't impact too much on Treasury.
  - The Chamber was pleased about the match funding offer from the Chancellor. The Chamber managed to raise £3 million from the private sector and were looking for the Chancellor to match fund that. With the aim to try and fund additional skills development for the planning functions across the UK to try and help provide that resource to move things forward with some practical implementations.
  - The Chamber had also been asking for a shift from the Recovery Loan Scheme towards a Growth guarantee scheme, which of course is moved ahead with as well. So that will help provide some much-needed finance for those businesses that perhaps are not as secure as most open market lenders would be pleased to see.
  - NI reduction is interesting in that that will help a lot of individuals, but it doesn't change the fact that employers' NI is still going up.
  - Business rate review - nothing new news on this, the Chamber has felt for a long time that this is inequitable.
  - The Chamber would have liked to have seen more decision making around exports because, there has been a very small rise in exports. Given where we are with some of the free trade agreements, the Chamber expected some backup now in terms of helping the employers of Kent and the business of Kent and Medway to be able to capitalise on some of those free trade agreements.

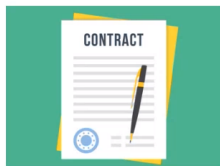
### Summary

- Kent County Council business survey ran October 2023 → January 2024.
- Dartford and Ashford Council co-launched, along with Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce.
- 686 responses in total; screening left 528 responses from representatives of businesses.
- 99% of all responses want to see a return of services.
- The responses represent businesses employing over 30,000 people in Kent and the wider country.



## Business interaction with Europe

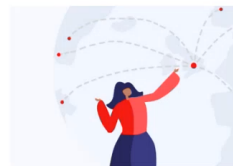
- 477 responses detailed that they either interact with Europe for:



Sales



Supply chain



Visitors

- For 94% - at least quite important to their business.
- 63% of businesses planning to grow such that travel to Europe may be required.
- **CONCLUSION: Travel and trade with Europe remains important for Kent businesses and international rail was and still is an important part of that.**

## How are businesses being impacted?

- 89% of respondents believed that Eurostar services not stopping in Kent was having an impact on custom of their businesses.
- 83% of the businesses surveyed indicated they know of other businesses also being affected.
- Although 58% of respondents state current use of London St Pancras, this is generating adverse impacts.



- **CONCLUSION: Businesses are incurring higher costs and spending more time, detrimental to productivity, for travel to and from Europe.**

## Getting a better outcome

- There is high visibility of this issue. Over 99% of businesses responding had been aware of the lack of international rail services.
- 99% are concerned at the lack of any future services.
- What improvements are needed?
  - The stations are fine, state many businesses.
  - Service frequency / timings are second most cited improvement needed.



99%

**CONCLUSION: After 24 years of sustained services and investment, Kent is ready to go.**

14/03/2024

Kent County Council

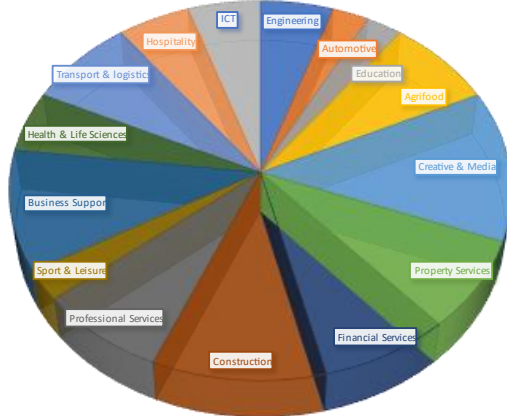


## What next?

- We are completing our analysis.
  - We will use the evidence to support our case making.
  - We thank all those that took the time to reply, and the support from the organisations that helped to publicise the survey.
  - Our experience shows that being able to demonstrate strong stakeholder engagement and evidence of impact is essential.
- 
- Simon Barnes commented on the announcement last week that HS1 are looking to increase capacity at St Pancras by 50% and doesn't think that bodes well for the long term opportunity for stopping trains in Kent. And the other issue ultimately, that Eurostar will have to replace some, if not all, of its rolling stock in future.
  - He further commented that it been a real problem for the university to undergo regional engagement with Lille, Leuven, and Ghent because it means they can't go backwards and forwards in a single day to those universities.
  - He has a feeling that the reason that HS1 are looking at the capacity increases at St Pancras is because they don't intend to open the other stations again.
  - Mark Welch said that it is Eurostar who will be deciding which stations will be operated not HS1. Furthermore, the push for increased capacity at St Pancras stems primarily from concerns regarding the mitigating the consequences of implementing the Entry/Exit System. The case for opening the Kent Stations is based on the public money that was spent on developing these sites and making the most of these.
  - Matthew Arnold had a question around what the next steps would be. And Jo Nolan was surprised not more businesses had responded and wondered if any businesses were included in the survey intended for the general public.
  - Mark Welch answered by saying they were pleased with the overall level of response and that there may be some overlap between the two surveys.
  - He further commented that the work they are doing is not just aimed at Eurostar but as much for government and get the government position to change. They are also talking to potential new operators that are around.
  - Vince Lucas asked what Mark Welch needed from BAB members to support the work and what the strategy will be going forward that will make the difference regarding the political change needed.
  - Mark Welch said that he would like to see as many people as possible support the case being made to government. To show a large consensus to support the argument.

Steve Samson provided an update on BAB Recruitment

BAB MEMBERSHIP - SECTOR BREAKDOWN



**Gaps to fill:**

Retail / Wholesale  
Manufacturing  
(Green) Energy

**Areas Missing:**

Dartford  
Sevenoaks

Recruitment drive from April 2024

**ACTION: BAB Members to provide suggestions for new Members that could address the current gaps in the slide above.**

**Update on Entry/Exit System:**

Stephanie Holt-Castle provided an update on the EU Entry/Exit System covered in the slides below:

The EES system is due to come into force from 6 October 2024 and applies to people travelling from all third countries not just the UK.

Checks will involve fingerprints and facial scans when travelling for the first time into the EU after 6 October.

Until an app is finalised by the EU countries (potentially up to three years away) , all biometric checks have to take place at the border i.e. port/tunnel and this requires a significant amount of time, particularly for coaches.

The Kent Resilience Forum is predicting a reasonable worst case scenario of 14 hour queues to the border (Port of Dover, Channel Tunnel) which would have a significant impact on the whole of Kent and its businesses.

While freight flows can be directed and managed through TAP and Brock, passenger vehicles cannot and the implication is that Kent’s whole road network could be affected, impacting severely on the day to day activities of local businesses and residents.

**Discussion:**

- Tudor Price wanted to add that Kent Invicta Chamber will be welcoming the Director General of the British Chamber of Commerce on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April to visit Eurotunnel and the Port of Dover. They will be extending the invitation to Kent County Council. The aim is to show that the Chamber are doing their part to try and get attention for this and then get some action from central government.
- Josh Fenton said that they are very concerned about EES and recently gave evidence in Parliament to the European Scrutiny Committee where two ferry operators and themselves were pushing for a delay because they don't think it's going to be ready in time.

- He added that although this will predominantly affect our traffic it will also have quite a significant impact on supply chains, particularly during the holiday period. Then with the border target operating model coming in, there will be a two-way system of extra friction, extra delay.
- Matthew Arnold said that it is critically important that we articulate the effect on the wider Kent economy because all the headlines are always on 14 hour queues heading into the port of Dover. But there are others that will be affected across the county. For example, getting children to school in Folkestone and Dover and the supply of fuel.
- He added we do not have the resilience within our highway network to be able to cope with this on an ongoing basis.
- Vince Lucas added that in compiling the responses we must emphasise the point of difference because politicians may think that they have heard this before, and that it wasn't that bad.
- Jo Nolan asked if there was an emergency Task Force in place.
- Stephanie Holt-Castle said that KCC are using the Kent Resilience Forum as an appropriate structure to respond to this.
- Jo Nolan also said that the general public and local businesses were not aware how serious the situation would be. How are we engaging politicians?
- Stephanie Holt-Castle said that the reasons we are six months out is that the date has been delayed several times, but KCC is lobbying.
- Jo Nolan asked if the pressure for the date is coming from Europe or the UK?
- Stephanie Holt-Castle answered that it is being imposed on all countries around the edges of the EU and other countries like Norway.
- Josh Fenton had a question about the three year timeline for a remote registration, via an app. As they were led to believe by Eurotunnel that was not going to be as long as that they thought it was going to be mid 2025.
- Stephanie Holt-Castle said that she would catch up with Eurotunnel but that the Kent Resilience forum was working to three years.
- Paul Barrett added that it was imperative that we amass all of the power that we have as BAB and ensure that the politicians are completely understanding of how important this is.
- Vince Lucas closed with saying that this is clearly a very important issue but would urge that we don't cry wolf that we get the right data and stats so we arrive at the most likely outcome rather than the worst. He recommended that the Kent Resilience Forum focused on making the whole of Kent Resilient and not just the motorway network.
- Roland Cooper said it was important to emphasise the ripple effect and consequences of a 14 hour delay to politicians. And the importance of changing the narrative because it is damaging investor confidence.

### **3. Economic Commentary**

The board members were invited by Vince Lucas to provide the following thoughts on their industry sector:

- A current challenge for your business / sector and what is working well.

#### **Alex Hicken, DHA Planning**

- Politics in planning is making things take longer than they should do. Feels like things are getting worse with the general election coming up. It is causing issues in terms of delivery of vital infrastructure housing, new business premises, etc.
- Their good news is that they have seen a slight easing in the labour market.

#### **Andrew Metcalf, Maxim PR**

- There are projects out there, but unfortunately quite a few of them are being put on hold or being delayed. And still feels that they are being ghosted in that briefs are coming in, project proposals are going out and then they don't hear anything.

- Good news is that the Ashford International truck stop has today been sold and it's been confirmed. They have been working for months to get BP Pulse to be part of a major investment to electrify with EV chargers for heavy goods vehicles.

#### **Ashley Hook, MHS Homes Group**

- The challenge is the drop off in new build across Kent. There are a number of factors driving this and for most house builders it is more about surviving than expansion. Most of the construction sites are what they call legacy sites that were commissioned two or three years ago. It was a pity that summer budget didn't have anything for housing or infrastructure within it.
- The positive point was that their company achieved two accreditations around equality, diversity, and inclusion.
- Another positive was that there is a Kent Housing Group that local authorities, housing associations and KCC are involved in and that it is going from strength to strength.

#### **Chris Broom, Discovery Park**

- It has been a busy time due to the Pfizer announcement at the back end of last year. So there has been lots of work with the assembled Task Force on that and hopefully some positive news coming. With significant interest in some of those assets that Pfizer will be looking to dispose of.
- The challenges would be that funding is still very tight in the market at the moment for early stage Biotechs. There is quite a lot of interest from companies and some good science, but that science won't necessarily come forward unless they can raise funding in the market and that that funding isn't readily available now. It's more focused on late-stage assets, so hopefully that situation will change towards the end of the year.
- Their residential team have submitted planning for 112 houses, on the land to the South of their site.

#### **Claire Eckley, NFU Kent & Eckley Farms**

- Kent dealt quite well with the excess rainfall, double the usual rainfall in February.
- The Blue Tongue Zone has opened up in the East Kent, so that's allowing farmers to get livestock off the farm, and they're enjoying some really high prices in the lamb sector.
- NFU did some work which showed that farmers are the second most respected profession in the country.
- Sadly, there have been some protesting farmers. They protested, but they rallied in Canterbury a couple of weeks ago. They will be going to London, so hopefully that will be a rally, not a protest, and hopefully they won't waste that Support they have got in the amongst the British public.
- Farmers are being seen in good light by politicians and farmers are getting used to lots of change.

#### **Emma Liddiard, Spurling Cannon Accountants**

- The challenge around staffing and trying to find good people, that has now turned around. They are getting a lot more good quality CVs in
- In terms of challenges, it would be the uncertainty of the upcoming election waiting to see what happens. But in terms of consultation and strategy it a positive as well because a lot of people are needing a lot of advice and support.

#### **Harry Jackson, Quinn Estates**

- The hotel at Betteshanger is great news for them and they are happy to get that over the line.
- In terms of struggles it would be the sales rate. People are getting stuck in long chains, struggling to sell their properties. There's no lack of interest in in the new builds, but people are not being able to sell their houses, which is slowing down the market.

#### **Jo Nolan, Screen South**



- A current challenge is that film production coming into the county is heavily reduced, after a brilliant year last year around 12 million came in, monitored by the Kent Film Office, the forecast this year is 4 million.
- Furthermore, equity investment in creative industries in the county is not an area that is as proactive as it is in other surrounding counties.
- The good news is that the government within the budget have increased the tax breaks for independent production, both in film, TV, SFX services, animation and in theatre, which will have a knock-on positive effect, but that does require investment at the same time going forward.
- The big issue for creative industries really is that they are project driven and they don't see themselves as being companies of asset and quality.
- Create South East final cohort deadline is April 18<sup>th</sup>. So, if Board Members know of any companies that are looking to develop and be investment ready this is the deadline.
- Overall, regarding Screen South, they are on good track this year despite some of the challenges.

Action: Vince Lucas commented that for future BAB meetings it would be useful to know what other counties are doing generally, and to look beyond Kent.

#### **Josh Fenton, Logistics UK**

- The uncertainty with general election, it's causing concern with their Members.
- A positive is that in the Chancellor's budget there was a phrase to fuel duty which we we'd hoped would be in place.
- A final negative is the fast rollout of the Direct Vision Standard in London, which means that most of our Members are going to have to put in some more expensive kit, even though not long ago they had just put in some expensive kit.

#### **Karl Hudson, KIMS Hospital**

- Their challenge probably remains the same in the healthcare sector, that clinical staff are difficult to come by and they do compete to some extent with the London market.
- Nearly 8 million people sat on NHS waiting list means that more people are turning to private healthcare, which is a positive for them. They are expanding their capacity to further support their local NHS trusts and to help them ease some of that.

#### **Mario Caccamo, NIAB EMR**

- The good news is that this year doesn't seem to be as bad as last year. How they manage energy costs, which was one of the biggest challenges they had last year is working much better this year.
- Mario feels that Kent did better with the recent weather and it's interesting because they manage sites in other counties and in Kent that wasn't too bad,
- The government wants to bring a National Food Security Index, which Mario feels should be supported.
- Finally, the current Growing Kent and Medway programme has been recently launched which will offer vouchers of up to £50,000 (It needs to have a matching component) to work with innovators from partners organisations. The focus of this funding call is on sustainability.

#### **Marion Brooks, Apogee Corps**

- Main challenge is around the attraction and retention of staff.
- Positive is that it does look like the market is slowing down from a wage inflation point of view. She feels that in the next 12 months or so that will start to calm down and it will start to be more managed.

#### **Martin Prentice, IOD ( sent written update included in minutes below)**

##### **Good News: 'Direction of Travel': GDP: Inflation: Rates**

It is encouraging that the UK economy returned to growth with GDP rising 0.2% in January – after having been technically in recession at the end of 2023.

Last week, the OBR forecast growth of 0.8% for 2024. Although it is early days, January's growth figure is consistent with achieving that kind of outcome.

Also, with CPI inflation set to fall <4% and interest rates <5.25% the 'direction of travel' provides more certainty to support business with financial planning.

### **Current Challenge: 'Unremarkable Budget for Business'**

There was little in the Budget that can be regarded as a 'game-changer' – and Business still faces the prospect of an economy that is unlikely to experience meaningful growth for some time.

The Chancellor rightly acknowledged that skills and labour shortages are a major problem for many UK enterprises.

But the Budget offered little to address the economy's deep-seated skills gaps.

### **'A Manifesto for Business': Chosen Topic**

Ahead of the forthcoming General Election, the IoD has just launched its ['Manifesto for Business': A Policy Roadmap for the next UK Government](#).

The Manifesto, see attached note puts forward policy recommendations relating to key areas of concern for IoD members.

These include the UK's Growth & Productivity Outlook, Skills Shortages, the Net Zero Transition, Exporting Challenges, and the UK Corporate Governance framework.

'Key Measures' proposed by the IoD include:

- An Industrial Strategy to provide a more stable and predictable 'Framework for Business Investment'.
- An Independent 'Skills Shortages Agency' to assess the UK's current and future 'Skills Needs'.
- Using Corporation Tax to provide a financial incentive for Companies to invest in 'Skills Shortage' areas and the achievement of 'Net Zero'.
- Reform of the Companies Act to reflect the key role that Directors play in modern society ... and
- Enhanced training for Directors about to take up their first role on the Boards of 'Major Companies'.

### **Matthew Arnold, Stagecoach**

- Patronage is up, largely because of the government's £2.00 maximum fare cap, which gives some bargain journeys across the county.
- However, that comes tinged with a bit of uncertainty around future government funding.
- There's kind of brick wall in March 2025 when no one knows anything about any future funding and that is bad news.
- The number of Road closures in the county of Kent in the past five years has increased by 225% and that's unsustainable. A figure from this week is that 30% of our roadworks on the network are not being operated in accordance with legislation.
- He also reiterated that he valued BAB and its members very much.

### **Roland Cooper, Considine**

- Current challenge is still nutrient neutrality. However, Natural England are changing the advice to free certain areas up. Also, there is quite a lot of dialogue with the local planning authorities. Some of them are now changing their attitudes somewhat in terms of being far more positive about small mitigation solutions and strategies to try and get smaller sites away. Well over half of our housing provision is SME based and on small sites.
- They have recruited successfully recently, and they are also making strides into getting work from outside the region. Sadly, areas that aren't so troubled by nutrient neutrality.

### **Daren Rose, Lloyds Bank**

- Gave a brief update from the business survey that they conduct and overall, they found that Business confidence remains relatively high.

- But interest rates and inflation are the biggest issues that the businesses are facing at the moment.
- With regards to Sectors, they are finding the service sectors relatively buoyant with retail stable, but they have seen a decline in confidence in manufacturing and construction sectors.
- There's some concern around supply chains, particularly around the impacts from the attacks in the Red Sea.
- Higher pricing, with over 60% of businesses expecting to increase their prices over the coming year.
- Still some concern there over inflation, but staffing looks to be improving a little bit.
- There are still quite a lot of businesses looking to hire more staff over the coming year, fewer looking to decrease, but they have seen that staff shortages are beginning to reduce now and pay seems to be stabilizing with fewer pay rises.

Below is a link to the wide range of reports that Lloyds Bank provide, including 'Business Barometer'. Lower down the page you will also see a section 'Why subscribe' that Members can use to register for any of the reports that are of interest. [Stay informed - Economics & Market Insights – Business Resource Centre \(lloydsbank.com\)](https://www.lloydsbank.com/stay-informed)

#### **Salim Somjee, Cripps LLP**

- Challenges, in terms of the increased cost of the business, wage inflation.
- He feels that the market is improving generally, but real estate has been challenging and M&A has been challenging.
- They have had a successful recruitment program in terms of lateral hires for partners, and it is encouraging that people feel that they're able to move.
- They implemented a successful merger, in what has been a difficult market.
- This shows that they adapt and make the best of the circumstances.
- Final piece of good news is that they have recently obtained B Corps accreditation and are pleased to be part of a global movement of businesses really that is trying to balance profit with people.

#### **Samantha Mason, MBM Balance**

- Challenge is that they would normally be able to scenario plan and help clients make decisions based on various scenarios and they are finding that they are having to be quite reactive and come up with solutions relatively quickly.
- She felt that this is the cumulation of all the different challenges that are faced in businesses in the region at present.
- Good news, is that they have just started their B Corps journey and that they are really interested in helping businesses become more sustainable and environmentally friendly.
- Samantha also had a positive comment about International Women's Day, and she was really impressed with all the events that all the businesses in the region put on last week. There were so many businesses supporting IWD and she hopes we can continue to promote gender equality and everything else associated with that throughout the rest of the year, and not just on International Women's Day.

#### **Simon Barnes, University of Kent**

- In terms of challenges the sector is effectively going through a restructuring at the moment. That's mainly due to student incomes being fixed and potentially also a reduction in income from foreign students associated with new visa rules. That is placing a stress on income when costs continue to go up.
- This is leading to them having to look at the courses that they offer. They offer courses in a much more modular style and are looking at the options around life long learning and the concept of life long learning vouchers.
- The sector is preparing itself for further change.

- On a positive note, the three universities in the region are working closely together largely around understanding what the implication of a place based concept is and what that means for Kent.
- He emphasised the importance of the food and drink sector and they are working with Mario Caccamo and colleagues at NIAB around Growing Kent and Medway.
- There's more work going on potentially at Discovery Park.
- Health is another area where they are identifying place based challenges and place based solutions. Perhaps the third area is around digital.
- Around work in industry, it was good to see DS Smith investing £40 million at its plant in Kemsley, which is the second largest recycling plant in Europe, so they're making further investments there around energy and increasing their production. The University are about to do some work with them.
- Challenges going forward will be around the future of Discovery Park. This is very important as it is here where innovation takes place. Once ideas move out of the universities it is important to know how they can work with people at Discovery Park, and others.

#### **Stephanie Holt-Castle, Kent County Council**

- Current challenge for the local authority remains delivering a balanced budget.
- We came the closest this year and for 24/25 to not being able to set a balanced budget but got some additional support from government, which has helped over the line, but that remains a huge focus.
- Good news is that the progress made with the Economic Framework. It is such a critical document to draw down national government investment going forward.
- There have been numerous conversations with the different civil servants to make sure they are understanding of the ambition that lies behind the Kent and Medway Economic Framework.
- Vince Lucas asked if the Framework contained metrics that success can be measured against.
- Steve Samson said that KPIs against the 21 action areas are currently being developed in more detail and will update BAB on these.
- **ACTION: Steve Samson to update BAB on the development of KMEF KPIs.**

#### **Tom Chown, Digitom**

- In terms of challenges, economically, people just aren't committing because of uncertainty surrounding the elections. This is now affecting a bit of a slowdown in terms of marketing and spend.
- Good news and it was lovely to hear about B Corps twice already during the meeting, as it is B Corps Month this month. It is a global movement of businesses that are looking at looking after their people, looking after their community, and looking after the planet. In Kent a growing number of businesses are becoming accredited.

#### **Tudor Price, Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce**

- The campaigns that the Chamber are working on include the Lower Thames Crossing, Manston, Gatwick N, et cetera.
- This includes EES as mentioned earlier in the meeting.
- The Chamber will also be talking to Eurotunnel about how they might be able to assist with some freight movements across the county.
- The Chamber are working quite a lot with the Global Business Network. These are British Chambers across 37 countries where we have free trade agreements in place with.
- On good news side of things, event attendance is up. It seems like lots of people are getting back out face to face again, but also online as well.
- And a membership is growing as well. They are looking to see what they can do to improve the membership offer and will be looking at some changes later in the in the calendar year.
- Vince Lucas asked if the Chamber supports companies through things like B Corp, cybersecurity qualifications etc.?
- Tudor answered that these were well known about with KICC Members and that the Chamber supported companies with this.

## **Vince Lucas, VA Rail**

- Vince Lucas was recently at the House of Commons on behalf of the Lower Thames Crossing and the final pieces of the planning have gone in. It is hoped that there will be an announcement from the government in June/July of this year.
- And whilst there's lots of talk about it being rescheduled in terms of time, they're using that time to get on with the design and planning, so it shouldn't add too much delay.
- In terms of railways there is some good news, South Eastern added back services on the high speed lines via Faversham back in December.
- in June we'll see more services in the evening period from Charring Cross to Maidstone. Congestion has been the most successful argument to reinstate services. (A list of changes is included in the pack).
- In the rail sector demand is still continuing to return, but it's not yet back to pre-pandemic levels. The problem for the industry is the reduction in commuting so the revenue received is much lower than it was pre pandemic. That continues to give the Treasury an ongoing problem in terms of support.
- Vince Lucas ended the meeting by mentioning the key areas covered, namely, KMEP/SELEP, International Train Services and the Entry Exit System. He thanked everyone for attending and their valuable contributions.

## **AOB**

### **Updates from members sent via email.**

#### **Simon Storey, Kent Cricket**

1. A current challenge for your business / sector  
Inflation & cost of living still! Income and commercial revenue increases are not growing as fast as rate as cost increases. Makes for uncertainty at best and lower margins/business plan risk at worst as we head into our new season.
2. A good news story for your business / sector  
News has broken that Kent Cricket want to be one of 8 new professional Women's Cricket Teams based at Beckenham (BUT up against the might of Surrey CCC!)
3. A free (positive) comment  
As a not-for-profit organisation but with plenty of return to provide to commercial partners - marketing/awareness, corporate social responsibility, hospitality in professional, men's, women & girls', disability – we are always looking to meet new partners interested in working with us.

#### **Gaurav Malhotra, Goaco.**

##### **A current challenge for your business / sector**

- Our company has invested heavily into applying for the KCC framework, only to be declined. It is interesting to see a LATCo is awarded as a supplier wholly owned by KCC. With this in mind, I strongly suggest for the local councils to have a level of commitment to support and grow local businesses, which will lead to an increase in local jobs and infrastructure.
- We're facing a big skills gap, but have kicked off our academy, we are actively training younger generations into skilled jobs (e.g. cyber security and AI).

##### **A good news story for your business / sector**

- Goaco are delivering for the crown commercial services & cabinet office for the new Procurement Act. We're aiming for a delivery of a unified supplier portal by October. If anyone on the panel is interested in being part of user research activities, please do reach out.
- We've recently been invited to the British Embassy in Saudi Arabia, showing off our public sector delivery skills. Our team in Ebbsfleet had a great time, and now being invited to British Embassy in Dubai to share expertise and knowledge with other organisations and UAE Government – which is part of a wider campaign via DBT to export British services.

- Our team has grown over 25% in the past 6 months.

**A free (positive) comment**

- Although we have challenges, I'm thankful with the potential opportunities that will arise from BAB and continue to support where I can further down the line.

DRAFT