

Chamber of Commerce - update for area board - 5th June 2013

Firstly - welcome to the new members of the Area Board. We were delighted that two of you were able to accept our invitation to come along to the recent Chamber meeting, so that we can get to know you and help understand what makes each other tick. Although we're all from different backgrounds, with different viewpoints and priorities, there is much more that we share in common than we differ on. We share a desire to look after the good of the Melksham area, the businesses, residents and visitors here, and we look forward to working together.

Just as the Area Board has changed recently, so has the Chamber. Modern technologies have enabled the Melksham Chamber to be able to operate once again from largely within the area, which considerably strengthens our efficiency, finances, and ability to act and encourage truly local business. We remain with the Wessex Association of Chambers of commerce, giving us the benefit of wider contact and lobbying opportunities, and members can choose an association membership giving them a wide range of business benefits ranging from an HR helpline through to mailing / marketing across Wiltshire. Wiltshire Business Support Service, sponsored by Wiltshire Council, is available through the association to all businesses - whether or not they're Chamber members.

Work remains to be done - we are still voluntary on a shoestring by too few. There remains a very real issue to getting busy business people to help and it's more about the sleeping members. And there's a real issue with official meetings at 3 in the afternoon, or early evening. And there's an issue of sponsors contributions totally funding the association in Trowbridge not the local chamber in Melksham at all. Having said that, the year just ended - a transition year - steps us in the right direction and the 2013/14 year will be a further step. I'm delighted to report my reselection as President for a further year at the AGM, with Steve Petty taking the role of vice president. Colin Harrison remains as our chair, and Phil McMullen as our secretary. Thanks too to other executive members for being a vital part of the team.

Current issues exercising the Chamber of Commerce and businesses in Melksham

Town Centre ... some businesses struggle, some are concerned at parking costs, at empty shop fronts, and at competition from multinationals. But in practise, we've got far fewer empty shops and are doing a lot better than many towns - which is not to say that we can rest on our laurels. Independent, almost without exception, are run by busy people and time to plan for the medium to long term evaporates in dealing with short term issues over long hours. It's good to see a degree of consolidation of effort vis the Town Team and perhaps the Chamber, but much more could be done under these umbrellas.

Tourism ... 60% of people out on the street in the centre of Marlborough are from outside the area, but only 6% in Melksham. We have a wonderful tourism potential, and we have a tourist information centre too. Tourism brings not only business to hotels, but also to restaurants, shops, and others. The blue plaque trail is an excellent start - but much more such as a visitor's "what to do" would help. And we

make little of the wonderful scenery around us and features like the Pack Horse Bridge which even many local people aren't aware of. And a bit of coach parking ...

Public Transport between Melksham and towns over 10 miles away remains difficult, with poor service levels, connections that miss by a minute or two, and a lack of information. This is truly iron with two of the town's biggest employers - Knorr Bremse and Cooper Tires - being involved in the transport industry. Visitor to Knorr Bremse - a train industry company - are taxied from Chippenham station or from airports. Yes, they use public transport - but not at this end of the journey. When "unitary" was set up, travel was one of the top 5 (or 20) concerns to the public in importance in the Melksham area, and also in the need for improvement. And 2011 survey businesses representing 11,000 staff said that an improved rail service on the line through Melksham would make a significant difference. There are private (car) issues too such as a link from Bowerhill Industry to the A350 which are being progressed.

I'm delighted to report that the Chamber has helped - and will continue to help - oiling the wheels to get these matters improved; progress is truly being made, and my report today is very much more optimistic than I would have reported after the previous set of council elections. Good work has been done for us to build on.

Melksham is growing, and welcomes new businesses and residents - in spite of issues mentioned above we've a lot going for us. Campus, Canal, probable transport improvements, better work with Visit Wiltshire on the tourism front, and so on. The Chamber can't claim credit for all of these, but it has provided and will continue to provide an element of help. We were delighted that 2 of the three newly elected councillors were able to join us at our last meeting - to meet with us and to see how we've been working together and can do into the future. We believe our aims are common ones - a thriving town, a great and friendly place to run a business, work and live. That's a moving goal, but one we're not too far from.

Graham Ellis