



## Hungerford Chamber of Commerce

### Minutes of Chamber Members' meeting held on Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> November 2020 via Zoom

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**In attendance:** Karen Salmon (Chair), David Small (Secretary), Derek Loft (Treasurer), Simon Hobden (Membership Secretary), Penny Locke, Jane Goldstein and Stuart March (committee members), Laura Farris (Member of Parliament for Newbury constituency), Karen Ferris, Gabrielle Mancini and Sean Murphy (West Berkshire Council), Helen Simpson (Mayor of Hungerford) and eight members of the Chamber i.e. Sarah Carreck, Mike Salmon, Ian Binns, Dan Gaskin, Andrew Spaak, Veronica Bailey, Steve Perkins and Fiona Cath. An apology for absence had been received from Fiona Hobson.

**1 Karen** welcomed all to the meeting and conducted the usual introductions.

**2 Laura Farris MP** addressed the meeting as our main guest speaker. She confirmed that at present there is no Government plan or intention to extend the current coronavirus lockdown, and that the main focus of attention is to provide support for businesses in various ways, including grants, furlough payments, loans and mortgage holidays, and with particular concern for the low-paid and for young people, as shown by the Kickstart programme. She said that the Chancellor will also be introducing measures to stimulate consumer demand and to wean people away from furlough and back into work. Government expenditure has been huge this year with around £300 billion spent as a direct result of the pandemic and this is bound to lead to other expenditure being cut back, and also to tax increases although in ways and areas that won't be damaging for businesses.

Questions were asked about the need to encourage people to shop locally both before and after Christmas, the difficulties faced by many small businesses in paying their rent and business rates and by those in the sports, travel and events sectors, and the need to ensure that University students will be able to come home for Christmas. In response, Laura said that although Covid-19 infection rates are still increasing, it is still expected that after 2<sup>nd</sup> December our area will return to 'Tier 1' as before, as our local hospitals are coping well and are all providing secondary care again, with the backlog of cases being reduced. There is also a new sense of optimism resulting from the development of an effective vaccine, the roll-out of the 15-minute test and the development of a new and better track n'trace system. There is genuine hope as a result that we will all be back to normal by Easter next year.

Laura confirmed that she would be happy to receive and respond to emails from any members with particular queries or concerns. Karen thanked Laura on behalf of all present for taking the time and trouble to attend our meeting.

**3 Gabrielle Mancini** (Economic Development Officer of West Berkshire Council) gave a Powerpoint presentation to the meeting about the Local Authority grants (£27m to date) and advice being made available for businesses, and the measures under preparation for assisting the recovery process including road closures, new signage, posters and advice leaflets and the specialist services being provided by the Public Protection Partnership. The Council's Economic Development Strategy will also be refreshed with greater emphasis on redeployment of employees who have been made redundant and the provision of career advice and assistance. The additional grant aid now available (a further £2.2m) will be based on the business' rateable value and it is intended that grants will be paid within 1-2 days of application, and there will also be a new 'additional restrictions' grant scheme (a further £3.17m) for which Government guidance is awaited. These grants will enable businesses whose income has been seriously reduced (in some cases to nil) due to the pandemic to apply for

help, including those of several members in attendance at the meeting who asked questions about this.

**4 Sean Murphy**, also of West Berkshire Council's Economic Development office also addressed the meeting and gave a slide presentation about the work of the Public Protection Partnership and the range of advice and support services which it provides. His address was followed by

**5 Steve Perkins** of Claritas Accountancy who advised the meeting about the Self-Employment Support scheme and the grants which can be applied for from 30<sup>th</sup> November onwards, and the 'bounce back loans' available for limited companies under the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan scheme.

**6 'Kickstart Scheme'** – this was described by HR Consultant Karen Ferris as a programme to encourage employers to offer employment to 16-24 year olds for at least 6 months, to be paid the national minimum wage for 25 hours p.w., and with the obligation to help them to improve their subsequent longer-term employment prospects. A set-up grant of £1,500 would also be available to the employer for each new employee taken on. Assistance would not be provided however should any placement directly follow any redundancy or reduction in the working hours of any other employee or employees.

**7 Current Chamber activities** – Karen and other members of the committee drew the meeting's attention to the updated Chamber website and social media platforms. It is also intended to circulate a Chamber Newsletter to all members in the near future and every month or so thereafter.

**8 Any Other Business** – the town's pigeon problem was raised and briefly discussed, and the Mayor confirmed that a Town Council-sponsored Pigeon Working Party had met on several occasions that that participation from the Chamber would be welcomed. The need to reconvene the Visit Hungerford Chamber sub-committee once the coronavirus pandemic eases was also mentioned.

**The meeting ended at 8.30 pm** and Karen thanked all who had attended.

**Signed** as a true record of the meeting

Karen Salmon, Chair

Date

16 November 2020