

Deal & Walmer Chamber of Trade Board Report 2023

At the AGM Peter Jull and Peter Varrall were re-elected as chairman and president respectively. Following the local elections Mike Walters replaced Eileen Rowbotham as the Deal Town Council representative on the Board. After many years of service Bernie O'Connell stood down for health reasons. Also, after more than 10 years in the role, Peter Davies relinquished his tenure as Secretary and a presentation after the Christmas lights switch on included a book of bad jokes to add to his repertoire oft inflicted on others. Julie Kemp was appointed in his stead.

The Love Local project evolved into a series of successful networking meetings involving a wider number of Chamber members and potential members which proved a useful recruitment method. Use of Facebook was improved and better regulated. Our promotional leaflet was updated. The Stranger in the Window competition had another successful year.

An application to the Shared Prosperity Fund grant scheme administered by DDC for the money still needed to complete the Turk Clock repairs was approved but the requirement for three quotations for such specialised work was insurmountable. The Chamber continued to pursue the alternative promised funding by DDC if it could achieve a reduction in the business rates on The Centre in Park Avenue but Valuation Office Agency resistance to the change meant there was a delay until a Tribunal hearing. The Shared Prosperity Fund was also targeted to meet aspirations for decorative lighting along the promenade.

The Chamber continued to proactively monitor prominent empty properties in the town centre and national businesses looking for potential sites in Deal. It was pleasing to hear that Jenkinson fishmongers would move to the Rooks site and that the ex Barclays Bank building would be occupied by the dentists expanding from Stanhope Road. Less welcome was the announcement that NatWest Bank would close, reinforcing our decision to close our account because their online banking offer would be inadequate without a local branch. The announcement prompted a Chamber investigation into the possibility of a Banking Hub in Deal to provide a better cash and change service to businesses than is currently accessible through the main Post Office which revealed that one wouldn't be considered while Lloyds remains open.

Revised plans for The Regent involved loss of the South Street car park so the Chamber consulted members on what impact this would have on their businesses before submitting a formal response. With Millards Insurance office closing the Chamber's registered office was moved to Castle's Removals address. Despite Chamber objections that it was contrary to their adopted Primary Shopping Frontage policy and that their retail space requirement assessment for the Local Plan showed Deal needed more retail space not less, DDC approved plans to convert most of the Original Factory Shop building into flats. At the public examination of the revised Local Plan the Chamber continued to press for the allocation a fair share of employment land and progress on the north Deal access road which was resisted by DDC planners making implausible arguments to the Inspector. During the examination in December news was received that Lidl were looking for a site in Deal and the opportunity was taken to encourage developers to consider a combined site with Travelodge and some light industrial units sought by other businesses, accessed from an extension of the existing start of the north Deal access road, outside the Local Plan. To be pursued in 2024.

Frustrated by DDC's approach to parking charges and the variable occupancy of spaces, surveys were conducted in Middle Street car park to evidence that it was underused during afternoons. A change of administration at DDC following the local elections and a change in the officer responsible for car park management and Chamber representations at another meeting with the council it was finally welcomed that there was a trial of the Chamber's recommendations that parking be Free After Three, during the run up to Christmas. Following a consultation of questionable methodology by Deal Town Council the Saturday closure of the High Street to traffic was made permanent. In response to Kent County Council's consultation on its cycling strategy the Chamber questioned why a Deal to Discovery Park route was not among its priorities. Representations to Southern Water's contractors while they were replacing water mains through the town centre helped minimise the adverse impact of road closures and precinct access for deliveries.

Chamber volunteers decorated the precinct with bunting for the coronation of Charles III and Le Vaillant Owen architects won the best window display competition. A survey response indicated that bunting would be popular every summer, subject to grant funding. The fundraising auction for Christmas Lights was replaced by a Christmas Draw so that although the prizes were still donated by business members, rather than being bought by other businesses, funds were raised from among the wider public. Acquisition of a card machine was beneficial where potential interest would have been thwarted by lack of cash. A larger group of volunteers from the wider community beyond the Chamber made the erection of the Christmas lights much faster. The large crowds at the switch on confirmed that holding it on a Saturday was a popular choice. The benefits of combining it with the Christmas Carnival will be reviewed.