

Penrith
Chamber of Trade & Commerce

Annual General Meeting Thursday 24th February 2022 Meeting Room, Dodd & Co.

President's Report

Good evening and thank you for coming along to our Annual General Meeting.

It is a very odd time for us all and for the Chamber, and I think that this restart gives us the opportunity to review and reflect on the priorities of the chamber and discuss with our members how we can best serve their needs.

Whatever we personally feel about the pandemic, it does seem to be somewhat appropriate that today is the day that we have been asked to resume normal life and put recent restrictions behind us.

The last formal meeting we had was the first Executive Meeting of 2020 and that was held at Cartmell Shepherd offices on Tuesday 3rd March. At that stage we were aware of COVID but it was early days and although it was in reality only a few weeks away from the first National Lockdown life was continuing pretty much as normal.

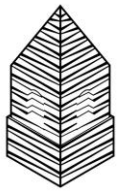
It is just shy of two years since our then and we have fallen foul of our own constitution as we are supposed to have our AGM's a maximum of 15 months apart. However, in the circumstances we decided that it was better to put unnecessary elements of chamber business to one side until we felt that we were coming out on the other side of the pandemic.

That being said, I don't want to give the impression that the chamber was mothballed during this time and so if you don't mind, I will give a brief rundown of the work that was carried out in the intervening period.

Our first action was to cancel subscriptions for 2020. We could see that the pandemic was going to impact heavily on our members and wanted to remove any additional burdens that we could. This was repeated for 2021 as it was clear that we would not be able to restart during that year.

At the start of the first lockdown, we were one of the first organisations to get out there amongst our businesses and find out what people were doing to keep going. We designed posters and initially offered these for free for collection from a local print shop. Placed in shop windows, these posters raised awareness of businesses offering delivery and collection services and this initial campaign was used to build up a directory of businesses and community organisations in many different sectors that were doing what they could to keep going through the lockdown. This campaign was successful and the lists were updated and published daily in the first few weeks of the lockdown and geographically, the directory ended up covering not only Penrith but many areas within the Eden Valley and beyond.

During the first phase, we also met regularly with members of Penrith BID, the Industrial BID, Penrith Town Council, Eden District Council and Cumbria County Council to discuss ways of supporting our members (and each other) and we all worked closely together to distribute information across our media channels. This was all done virtually of course so we all had to get used to Zooming (other software is available).



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In May, we were working with the same stakeholders to provide support as the first lockdown restrictions eased. The main focus of this was to contact our members and find out how they were re-opening in a 'COVID Safe' manner. The responses were gathered together and put on a combined list that was shared between the organisations.

In June, as businesses were re-opening, we found out that Cumbria County Council had made the decisions to close Middlegate to facilitate social distancing. We stood against this for a few reasons:

It was very short notice (no businesses were aware of it until the day before road closure signs were delivered to the town).

It was very badly planned – it still allowed vehicles to access Middlegate using side roads (only the access at Middlegate was closed).

It was dangerous (kids, unaware that vehicles were still getting through Middlegate were seen cycling the wrong way through the Narrows and a serious accident was avoided only through intervention).

It was also very disruptive at a time when businesses needed all the support they could get to stay open.

It took 4 weeks of lobbying (again with the support of other stakeholders) to have these restrictions removed.

After the lifting of restrictions, the town started to get back on an even keel and were a bit more prepared following the first lockdown that when the second lockdown arrived, the support was there and most businesses had a strategy in place to keep going as best as they could. And that was 2020.

For 2021, things have been less frantic and although no formal meetings were held, we did manage a few informal zoom calls with other members of the chamber to keep up to date on things and again, we decided to set normal chamber business to one side until restrictions eased.

However, we have continued attendance at the Town Working Group meetings and have been active consultees in the development of the Penrith Place Plan which is a document that has been prepared to support funding applications to the Borderlands Growth Deal.

We are the independent voice on the Town Working Group and feel that we have a key role going forward in particular during the dissolution of the district and county councils and the formation of the new Westmorland and Furness Council.

So what's next?

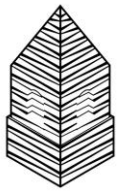
As discussed, we see this as a fresh start and do not have fixed plans for this year.

We would like to restart person to person networking events.

(We have already booked The Lounge on 24th March (from 6pm) for a first social night. We want this to be open to all and would encourage members and non-members to attend, to have fun, meet others, and also give people the chance to discuss how we would like to see things move forward both for the Chamber and for Town).

We want to engage with our members about Penrith Town Centre.

If we manage to get funding from the Borderlands Growth Deal we want to be able to put that to the best use for the town and to do this we need to hear from people and discuss projects and actions that can lead to improvements.



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We want to see more people getting involved.

We need more members and more members to join the executive team. We have had no new executive members for some time and will struggle to continue without further support.

We would like to work more closely with the Town's BIDs.

We have been in discussion about joint meetings. But we are a different organisation, and it is important to keep our identities apart while working together.

We would like to expand our membership geographically and include Eden Valley.

There are so many varied businesses throughout Eden and although our primary focus will always be Penrith, we have a lot to offer and a lot to gain from engaging with nearby businesses.

In summary, we are keen to get back to business and support our town. We can only do this through active membership of the Chamber and our primary aim this year is to focus on getting out and meeting with people and building up support.

Thank you.