

Business Engagement with MPs

Introduction

On Friday 4th June, GWE Business West organised the first of a series of meetings between businesses and local MPs in Gloucestershire, West of England and Swindon. The main purpose of these meetings was to bring business members and MPs together as part of an ongoing dialogue, to discuss issues of importance to business and to debate the value of the British Chambers of Commerce "Business Recovery Test", as well as to hear from our local MPs about issues of interest/concern to them.

Cheltenham meeting – MPs present were Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) and Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold).

Swindon Meeting – both Swindon MPs were present – Robert Buckland (Swindon South) and Justin Tomlinson (Swindon North).

Bristol Meeting – Dawn Primarolo (Bristol South) was present.

The discussion below highlights the areas of common agreement and discussion, as well as some of the more area specific issues raised.

Business Recovery Test

Discussion on this was prompted by a Chamber Action Alert issued by British Chambers of Commerce asking all Chambers to participate in a coordinated lobbying of MPs on business issues, on Friday 4th June to Sunday 6th June. A brief explanation of the BRT is given below:

Business Recovery Test – as the new government moves policies forward, we want our local MPs to subject major economic policy decisions to a Business Recovery Test. The test would work as follows:

- If a policy proposal can spur business growth and wealth creation, it should be supported
- If a policy proposal has negative impacts on businesses, even unintentionally, it must be rejected.

The examples provided were based around the employer National Insurance rise and proposed changes to Capital Gains Tax – both fail the Business Recovery Test.

Discussion at our meetings varied on this issue but overall the concept of the Business Recovery Test was supported, and the general principle welcomed, but also some suggestion that it needed better definition for it to be useful. Many felt the Test would work well when judging tax changes but less well with other economic policy issues.

Local Enterprise Partnerships

A topical issue for conversation was the proposed abolition of Regional Development Agencies and their replacement with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). These are proposed as joint local authority-business bodies brought forward by local authorities themselves to promote local economic development. The coalition Agreement says they may take the form of existing RDAs in areas where they are popular, but in other areas should form around "natural economic areas".

The discussion at our meetings was focused on "what is a natural economic area"? The options/issues explored included the following:

- A recognition that the South West region doesn't stack up effectively as a region
- Possible importance of an M4 corridor sub region
- The strength of the Bristol city region and how this would work on its own or combined with other areas
- The potential for bringing together West of England, Wiltshire/Swindon and Gloucestershire into one LEP
- The formation of LEPs around existing county areas.

It was agreed that this was a key issue for business and one we would need to take a position on and lobby for. There was also common agreement on the need for these partnerships to be business led around areas that make sense to business.

GWE Business West will bring business together across our wider area to discuss this issue and how best to go forward.

Business Link

There were concerns raised by members about the future of Business Link (BL) given some of the statements made by the Conservative Party prior to the election. Discussion at our meeting challenged the perception that not enough businesses benefit from or use BL and raised the importance of BL to small businesses in particular.

There was general acceptance that the BL service needed some modification and improvement but that to many it was an important and vital form of support.

GWE Business West will continue to work with MPs, Government and British Chambers of Commerce to help develop the BL service to continue to meet the needs of small business.

The Planning System

Discussion then turned to how the proposed abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies would impact on the delivery of growth and development in our area, with specific concerns about houses and jobs. Without a strategic level of decision making will the proposed incentives be enough to convince local communities to accept and embrace development? Without national targets for housing building will we be able to provide enough houses for our employees?

These questions and others led to a discussion about vision and the need for a strategic vision for our area that sets out key spatial priorities, develops ideas for delivery and establishes a platform from which the business community can lobby for improvements. The vision needs to identify the challenges we face,

This work has already begun in Bristol through the Bristol 2050 visioning project, led by GWE Business West and involving our wider membership.

GWE Business West will continue to lobby for strategic growth and development to support business needs. We will pull together a long term business vision for the Bristol City Region and begin those discussions in other areas, in Swindon and in Gloucestershire.

Local Issues – Bristol, Swindon, Gloucestershire

A range of issues were raised in each location that are more specific to that area, with town centre regeneration, transport and further education featuring in Swindon, whilst the focus in Gloucestershire was on employment and jobs, business profitability and improving rail links. Members at our Bristol meeting talked about elected mayors, the benefits of having an Independent Transport Authority for Bristol and the challenges of growth and development in the green belt.

End Note

GWE Business West plans to hold regular meetings with local MPs across Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and West of England to bring business and politicians together to work in partnership to deliver on priorities for our area. These discussions may take the form of local or London based meetings, lunches or dinners, question time events and individual discussions.

If you would like to be involved in these meetings, please do contact me and we will keep you informed of future events.

Tessa Coombes
Director of Policy & Strategy
GWE Business West

Email - Tessa.coombes@gwebusinesswest.co.uk
Telephone - 01275 370793