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5th September 2011

An open letter that may be freely circulated concerning the setting up of a Melksham Independent Trader's Group for the High Street.

Dear Paul, Hayley, Sean and other independent Melksham High Street retailers,

A co-ordinated voice for the retailers in Melksham is welcome news. It's something that's overdue in many towns in Wiltshire. Indeed the Melksham Chambers of Commerce, Melksham Town Council, and other local groups too have struggled to engage the traders, with limited success. This too is in common with other Chambers of Commerce across the area.

So can I ask you, please, to extend your co-ordination to all retailers in Melksham. And to co-ordinate too with the local Town Council, Chambers of Commerce, branch of the FSB, Community Area Partnership, Tourist Information, and others.

According to some of the recent press reports, other local organisations have not been invited to work with you, and indeed haven't been informed over your plans. In the very short term, that may be fair enough, but in the long term we all need to work together for the common good. As well as being a volunteer with the Chamber of Commerce, I run an independent business that brings visitors to Melksham from far and wide. While they're here, they buy what they need in local shops, they use local services such as banks, restaurants and sport facilities, and they often enjoy the more "tourist"y things that are around too. Residents as well as visitors make use of this combinations too, and if 'the whole' is attractive, it helps to persuade people from surrounding villages and towns to choose Melksham as their destination, rather than other towns, cities and malls further afield.

We're in exciting, and changing, times in Melksham. Wiltshire Council's combined new Campus is to be built in the town centre. It combines the benefits of having lots of facilities on a single site, and the benefit of having those facilities at the natural hub in a way that - at one time - appeared impossible. The Chamber of Commerce was able to strongly support the eventual solution (and indeed play a significant background role), bolstered by the support of a wide range of community representatives including some of yourselves. And the Chamber has - to the best of its ability - helped drive the strategic plans for the town forward via the Core Strategy, and echo inputs to Wiltshire Council from member and non-member businesses on topics such as Council provided car parking. But in these areas, its ability is severely limited when solicitations of views from the town's traders often result in little feedback until it's so late in the day that decisions have been made and implemented by the Council. The furory over car parking charges didn't take The Chamber by surprise - but what could we do when we solicited views a year early to be told by some traders that "we're too busy keeping our heads above water to look a long way ahead"? And there's at least one other load of sh*t that I expect will hit the fan in the next year or two.

What's on the Chamber of Commerce Agenda at the moment, or has been on there in the last month or two? Service Excellence Awards. Meeting with Bank of England / feedback on local businesses and the effect of the current economy and economic policy. New Business Competition / 2012. Spot the Oddity. Car Parking and Buses. Promoting Melksham for business. Melksham Welcome Packs. Waste disposal and recycling. Christmas plans. Town Map. Big Society local plans. The proposed out of town shopping mall. Core Strategy, looking ahead on policy up to 2026. Melksham Connectivity from beyond Wiltshire. Future industrial Development. Getting the Campus right (contents, making best use of it for the town). River and Canal. There are other things on the horizon too. 2014 is the 200th anniversary of Melksham Spa, and perhaps there are opportunities there.

Now - to clear the air little, I hope. Some of the recent newspaper comments, published as being the words of Melksham Traders, have been really upsetting to people who have worked long and hard (and over and above the call of duty) to help Melksham's town centre, and Melksham as a whole. Whilst there are times that hard talking is useful and necessary, there are now bridges to be rebuilt. Otherwise people who will be cautious in providing (or reluctant to provide) help – that too has already been reported in the local paper with regard to a potential meeting venue.

The Chamber of Commerce doesn't have all the answers. Nor does the town council. Nor Wiltshire Council, any one political party, MCAP or anyone else. And I don't think you do either. But between all us we have more of the answers, and we should work together - perhaps grouping ourselves under a logical umbrella to make effective and unduplicated use of our resources. The Chamber - and the Wessex Association of Chambers - can certainly help you far more if you can work this way.

The next meeting of the Chamber of Commerce is on 27th September, and guests are welcome. The venue is Well House Manor on Spa Road (a short walk from town centre businesses, or you can part there) and the start time is 18:30. I'm copying this letter to Ann-Marie Escott, the secretary, to ask her to ensure this item is on the agenda. Please let her know (by phone to 01225 355553 or by email to ann@wessexchambers.org.uk) how many of your town traders group can attend, so that we can cater (teas and coffees) as appropriate.

Finally, I'm copying this letter to the other organisations mentioned explicitly or implicitly to invite them, too, to come along on 27th so that we can all put our heads together and use the active enthusiasm we all have for the benefit of all businesses in Melksham, and for the wider community too.

Graham Ellis

Whilst this letter largely reflects the views of the Melksham Chamber of Commerce, it has not been formally adopted at a meeting and so the views expressed remain to a degree mine personally, and it's very likely that I have overlooked a number of the activities in which we currently are involved, or have looked at recently.