



Minutes from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Black Country 5th Meeting

Date: Tuesday 2 March
Venue: Online (via Zoom – joining details below)
Time: 1pm – 2pm
Chair: Mike Wood MP
Secretariat: Neil Anderson, appg@blackcountrychamber.co.uk
Speakers / Presenters: Calum Nisbet (Black Country Chamber of Commerce); Charlotte Horobin (Make UK); Steve Richards (Strut Direct); Rob Bunting (Angle Ring Co Ltd); Corin Crane (Black Country Chamber of Commerce); Paul Maubach (Black Country and West Birmingham CCG); Justin Owens (Robinson Brothers)

In Attendance:

Parliamentarians

Mike Wood MP; Chair (MW)	Member of Parliament for Dudley South
Stuart Anderson MP (SA)	Member of Parliament for Wolverhampton South West
Suzanne Webb MP (SW)	Member of Parliament for Stourbridge
Pat McFadden MP (PMc)	Member of Parliament for Wolverhampton South East
John Spellar MP (JS)	Member of Parliament for Wolverhampton Warley
Dan Horrocks (DH)	Mike Wood's Office
Chole Elkin (CE)	Suzanne Wood's Office

Invited Guests / Secretariat

Neil Anderson, Secretariat (NA)	Director of External Affairs, Black Country Chamber of Commerce
Corin Crane (CC)	Chief Executive, Black Country Chamber of Commerce
Karen Webb (KW)	Director of Business Services, Black Country Chamber of Commerce
Calum Nisbet (CN)	Commercial Director, Black Country Chamber of Commerce
Charlotte Horobin (CH)	Regional Director – Midlands & East England, Make UK
Steve Richards (SR)	Managing Director, Strut Direct
Rob Bunting (RB)	Business Development Manager, Angle Ring Co Ltd
Paul Maubach (PM)	CEO, Black Country & West Birmingham CCG
Justin Owens (JO)	HR Manager, Robinson Bros

Apologies: Jane Stevenson, MP (JS)

NO.	KEY DISCUSSION POINTS/ ACTION POINTS/ DECISIONS	By whom?	By when?
5.01	Welcome and Apologies		
	<p>Mike Wood (MW) opened the meeting by welcoming attendees to the fifth meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Black Country.</p> <p>The minutes of the previous meeting were approved unanimously.</p>		
5.02	International Trade		
	<p>An update was provided by speakers followed by a discussion relating to exporters and importers following the end of the transition period and the introduction of the UK and EU Trade & Co-operation Agreement.</p> <p>CN provided an overview of examples and case studies provided by members of the Black Country Chamber of Commerce highlighting issues arising from the challenges adjusting to the new arrangements (volume of paperwork; rising costs), the implementation of new rules (customs arrangements) and core provisions of the UK & EU Trade and Co-operation Agreement (Rules of Origin, VAT).</p> <p>CH provided an overview of examples and case studies by members of Make UK stating that one in eight companies were unable to plan for the end of the transition period with 68% saying that whilst they felt they were ready they had faced disruption. Many firms have been reluctant to borrow but are now facing issues due to diminished cash reserves and an increased cost to doing business. Firms are beginning to look at alternatives to exporting with the fear EU contracts will move from the UK to EU countries. Issues by firms can be unique to their sector, customer base, countries traded in, supply chains etc. but can often be very detailed and complex.</p> <p>SR provided insights into how their business has been impacted including difficult trading conditions between the UK and EU including issues with French customs agents and Germany customs not ready. Transport costs have increased by 50% in</p>		

	<p>some instances and both materials and customer costs have risen. Transport time has also increased substantially with journeys previously taking 24 hours, now taking 72 hours.</p> <p>RB provided insights into how their business has been impacted stating that a previously seamless supply chain is now hampered by substantial increases in time it takes to deliver / receive goods, lack of clarity around Rules of Origin when trading with Northern Ireland and extra quality assessments so far adding to already increased costs and pressure of exporting with a further concern that hauliers are being overwhelmed.</p> <p>PMc asked what can this group do to support this (see 5.05) and what prospects existed for expansion into new markets? SR added that whilst they had not experienced big issues with trade to other parts of the worlds, there was difficulty in getting goods from China due to containers being block-booked by other countries and an easing of paperwork could expedite matters as it is currently quicker to send a pallet to Australia than France, trading with the Republic of Ireland has increased from 24 hours to nearly six days.</p> <p>SA asked for businesses to be signposted directly to their MPs and for business support agencies on the call to help gather information and send to the respective MP’s office and to support the promotion of MP Export Webinars to further obtain intelligence and evidence.</p> <p>SW endorsed the point that getting information was key and offered to be a conduit where detail could be flagged with relevant department and minister and further outlined the Export Programme as a cross party route for disseminating details, knowledge and asked for support from the business support agencies to promote.</p> <p>RB added that feedback had already been given to trade associations and individual businesses / customers had been encouraged to flag issues and stressed that the grace period was due to end with structural challenges still existing in the system</p>		
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	<u>ACTION POINT: Black Country Chamber of Commerce and Make UK to establish mechanisms for capturing and disseminating issues to MPs and promote upcoming webinars</u>	CN / CH	Closed
5.03	Further Education (FE) Whitepaper and the Black Country Pilot		
	<p>CC was due to present an update on the recent FE Whitepaper and the region. Due to the meeting focusing on the above, the decision was taken for this matter to be dealt with outside of the meeting.</p> <p><u>ACTION POINT: CC to circulate presentation and overview by email to APPG members and invite comments / feedback</u></p>	CC	w/e 5/3
5.04	COVID-19 Black Country Business Response		
	<p>JO provided an update on how their business is responding to COVID-19 and outlined challenges experienced with Lateral Flow Testing (LFT) stressing that businesses wanted to play a responsible role in protecting their employees. Whilst LFT was available to businesses of certain sizes adhering to specific and complex clinical guidelines (often requiring additional investment on behalf of the business), and testing available at various sites around the region; their business has purchased tests to give to their employees so they could test regularly at home.</p> <p>MW suggested that JO speak directly to Nicola Richards, MP (NR) and asked if rollout of LFT within workplace was down to limited space available or other operation constraints.</p> <p><u>Action Point: NA to introduce JO to NR when circulating minutes to those MPs not in attendance today</u></p>	NA	w/e 5/3

	<p>PM advised that there were still significant challenges around testing in the workplace, in certain sectors (including the NHS) there has been the adoption home testing in some instances.</p> <p>CH highlighted that whilst 44% of businesses have registered for LFT schemes the remainder are finding the adoption of testing in the workplace too complex citing space requirements or interruption of operations as an issue to be addressed and perhaps the rollout of LFT to industrial estates might be a way forward.</p> <p>PM presented a regional update and highlighted that whilst the regional vaccine rollout total was in excess of 90% take-up there was evidence to suggest that, with certain groups, the take-up was substantially lower. It was also advised that whilst infection rates were coming down, positive tests in the Black Country remained the highest in the midlands.</p>		
5.05	Next steps: APPG Asks for Government & Future Agendas		
	<p><u>Asks for Government</u></p> <p>Government to examine and put in place systems which overcome issues following the end of the transition period and the implementation of the UK and EU Trade and Co-operation Agreement (including customs procedures, rules of origin); hauliers and customs staff to be provided with the necessary training and resources to overcome barriers and capacity issues jeopardising just-in-time supply chains and increasing costs to trading internationally.</p> <p>Government to consider how more businesses can access LFT via more accessible and readily available sites near business parks, industrial estates etc. and whether home testing kits can be made available to more businesses / sectors.</p> <p><u>Future Agenda Items</u></p>		

	<p>Previous suggestion that a future agenda topic of the future of construction (focussing on the role of 'green' infrastructure in domestic and other developments) was carried forward.</p> <p>Previous suggestion that a future agenda topic on Armed Forces and how region can support veterans and armed forces families into long term sustainable employment was carried forward.</p> <p>Previous suggestion that a future agenda topic on Kickstart was carried forward.</p>		
5.06	Any other business		
	None		
5.07	Date of next Meeting		
3.06	<p>Tuesday 8 June 2021, 3pm – 4pm (scheduled for Zoom but could change to face to face)</p> <p>Note, this will also include the APPG's AGM</p>	NA	Closed