

MOTION FOR SEATH EAST REGIONAL CONFERENCE

From Canterbury & Coastal Liberal Democrats

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Making the whole of England an enterprise zone – putting Chambers of Commerce on a Statutory Basis

The motion from Canterbury

“Conference is concerned that successive governments have been too reliant on top down economic development and business support mechanisms, that have ignored many parts of the country, ignored the ability of local people to better manage local affairs and failed to create structures to encourage and support local enterprise and local growth. Remedying this situation is fundamental to the UK’s future success and particularly so given the enormous uncertainties around the UK’s relations with the EU.

Conference believes it is a core principle of our party to promote enterprise and local initiative, empower entrepreneurs, build the national skills and expertise base and responsibly devolve power down from government wherever possible and practical.

Conference believes that much of the collective strength and expertise of British businesses, particularly SMEs, is an under-used national asset that needs the support of government to mobilise it.

Conference is asked to support the motion that revitalising the chambers of commerce movement be adopted as Liberal Democrat party policy, namely

- Allocating a fund of £100 million over the life of a five-year parliament to enable chambers to come into being in all parts of the country and strengthen existing chambers.
- Giving chambers of commerce the statutory right to be consulted, to comment and to propose on local matters of skills and employment education and training, so that the views of chambers broadly represent the views of local businesses and give local business a more persuasive and authoritative voice in influencing the nature, quality and structure of local training regimes.
- Giving all chambers a statutory right of access to relevant ministers and local authority leaders, raising the status of SMEs, and ensuring that the voice of local business is heard and given weight.
- To make membership of chambers voluntary and affordable but with the ambition that the increased influence of such bodies will provide a strong incentive for local businesses to join and that membership of a chamber is seen by consumers as an endorsement of a business and thus raise consumer confidence in local businesses.
- To that end, a nationally agreed system of accreditation to local chambers would be developed, so that chamber members clearly understand their duties and responsibilities to consumers as accredited members and that consumers could expect similar accreditation standards everywhere. *Members could lose accreditation under very strictly laid down procedures.
- Giving chambers the freedom to be innovative in developing new initiatives and programmes designed to build stronger local economies, including food and farming economies, and to seek the support of national and local government, government agencies and the education sector and to engage with international bodies and organisations to the benefit of all.

Please support the motion. “

Supporting Rationale

- Craft Guilds and Chambers of Commerce have been part of British and European life for over 400 years.
- According to the Association of European Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the Chambers system annually helps create c700,000 new companies, train 3 million people and introduce around one million small businesses to export markets.
- In many countries, chambers carry out business administration functions such as export certification and apprenticeship training structures and certification, often, in addition to promoting the interests of business, promoting their regions and providing business advice. In a number of countries, chambers have a statutory right to be consulted on certain public policies and a right to be heard by government.
- In some countries (e.g. The Netherlands) all businesses must belong to a chamber. Membership is voluntary in most European countries.
- The UK has one of the least developed chambers systems in Europe. Many areas have no active chamber. The most successful are in big cities and predominately financially supported by large businesses and professional services firms. In Europe, chambers are overwhelmingly organisations of SMEs and exist to primarily further the interests of SME members and promote local economic success.
- **The political case:** *a distinctive policy differentiating the party from others (and muscling into Conservative territory); strengthening the party’s economic offering, e.g. jobs, skills, competitiveness, stimulus, local, national and international; reaching out to the nation’s SMEs and estimated 5 million self-employed; handing power down, not dictating from above; business-friendly, community-friendly. Not new money, but found from reordering priorities; e.g. scrapping LEPs, no more enterprise zones, but, “making the whole country an enterprise zone.”*