

Leeds Chamber of Commerce Annual Lunch, Wed 27 July 2016

Gerald Jennings, Leeds Chamber President – speech (abridged version)

As the voice of business, representing your interests, the Chamber has focused on a number of key activities. Engagement with members has grown and we have groups working on skills, housing, planning, the public realm, the Waterfront, transport and property.

We have continued to be involved in the discussions around Devolution, what the Northern Powerhouse can deliver, how do we get the housing, skills and transport deficits we have resolved. We have helped to establish the BID for Leeds, widened the debate on HS2 and ensured we achieved an alternative solution to the engineering one initially proposed. We have helped to create the University Technical College –which is about to go live.

EU referendum

However, you feel about the result, my message is that the UK remains a strong economy and whilst we are entering choppy economic waters we will get through this, but in order to do so we have to remain positive. Let's not talk ourselves into a recession.

The vote has created uncertainty and we will need to work hard to resolve the challenges and issues we now face. But that's what business does on a daily basis. We need to focus on the future and build a strong, dynamic and vibrant economy that will benefit all who live, work and play in Leeds and the wider City Region.

Following the referendum, the Chamber's call to Government was to focus on those issues which had been side-lined during the referendum. I don't think any of us were expecting the Shakespearian drama which unfolded directly afterwards. However, with the new Government in place we need them to move quickly back to the business of running the country and helping us do what we do best- running our businesses.

It is time our Westminster politicians thought more about how they can work collaboratively with businesses and local stakeholders rather than their party politics and helped us to help their constituents. Maintaining business confidence and supporting growth, matched by action, should be the primary focus of the government and we need to see action to boost growth by delivering the urgently required modernisation of our infrastructure and incentivising business investment.

South Bank Leeds

From the Chamber's perspective many in the room will know how influential we were in

encouraging a rethink about the location of the proposed HS2 station, something which will have an enormous effect on the city and South Bank in particular. The report we published last summer played an instrumental part in ensuring that when HS2 arrives it will do so as part of an integrated railway station in the heart of our city.

We have produced a second report that captures the enthusiasm and positivity from the private sector for this opportunity. We have followed up with the newly appointed Transport Secretary, Chris Grayling, and I am hopeful of bringing him to Leeds to meet with all of you in due course.

Waterfront

Keeping on the theme of city opportunities, the Chamber is currently working on a report looking into the Leeds Waterfront. The river and canal that runs through Leeds has in my view been long overlooked as one of our potential jewels in the crown. This year on 22nd October we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the completion of the Leeds/Liverpool canal. It is Britain's longest single man-made waterway. In some ways we've seen the river as more of a threat and of course we suffered hugely just over 6 months ago with the floods. The theme of our report will be based around Accessibility, Attractiveness and Activity.

Capital of Culture

The Chamber is a massive supporter of the city's bid to be European Capital of Culture in 2023. Paula Dillon, our VP, and myself have been in regular touch with the bid team.

It is unclear, however, if we will be allowed to bid after we trigger Article 50 and leave the EU. The work that has started on the 2023 bid has already shown how the city can come together. If it turns out we are prohibited from bidding then I believe we should have our own "Leeds International Cultural Festival", for a whole 12 months and earlier than 2023. We need to make so much more of the cultural and artistic assets we have in the city and use them to sell Leeds as a place to be. I believe we could make this a hugely successful event, in the same we set the bar to new heights for the Tour de France Grand Depart.

Close

Brexit shows business needs to engage with politicians and make our voice heard and make a difference- and we can e.g. HS2. We, the Chamber, have access at local, regional and national level to politicians and senior decision makers. The Chamber is forward thinking, ambitious and provides leadership. Your Chamber is here to support you, connect your businesses and to represent your interests.