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Galway Chamber — flying the flag for the west

BY DECLAN VARLEY

In its 230th year, Galway Chamber has seen its fair share of emergencies, wars, recessions, all challenging them in their different ways. But perhaps nothing has impacted as much as the current pandemic. But in adversity, there is opportunity, and the Chamber has stepped into the role of minder, mentor, and protector of all the businesses not just in the city, but in the region.

With the Galway City Business Association having being subsumed last week, the Chamber is at its most-needed point at this juncture in its long established history. Its popular CEO Kenny Deery is relishing the challenge of helping educate local businesses about the supports that are out there to help them through to next summer when a semblance of normality will resume in the wake of the successful vaccines.

In addition to pushing the Galway Shop Local campaign, the Chamber is engaging in a series of long term strategies that had been agreed by the Galway Chamber council that will see it play a key role in the development of Galway over this decade and the ones to come after it; setting in train a plan that will take the Chamber to its 250th birthday as the key driver of a modern, sustainable, functional Galway as the capital of the region.

"It is the long term strategy that we have been normally focusing on, but at the moment it is all about keeping businesses in business, making sure they use the revenue warehousing which is a huge scheme which people haven't got their heads properly around yet. And just keeping their doors open until the middle of next year when hopefully

that vaccine will be rolled out," said Mr Deery this week.

Need for uniformity

He feels that the west has missed out because of a lack of uniformity among the many competent but diverse agencies and that a unified approach would yield much more for Galway and the region.

"For me, what I have seen in my time in this role is that there are a lot of great people in different organisations doing great stuff, but they are doing it individually. As a result, it means that Galway City and County and the wider region have missed out on programmes and funding.

"We are not shoulder to shoulder the way we should be for Irish Government funding schemes and also with the local authorities.

"We are keen to bring the key players in Galway together so that we have a leadership forum. Cork has this and Dublin has it and as a result they have very successful funding applications," he said.

He said that at the start of this year, the focus was on Brexit and its impact and that is still the case, but then we were hit by Covid and the Chamber set out to deal with that, on a sector by sector case.

"It was through this that we began to harness the power of the Chambers network as opposed to the business organisations who deal with higher level policies, but the chambers are uniquely embedded in towns and communities and the Government has recognised that," he said.

"Because we were out of the block on that engagement plan early on, we have been able to have direct input into some of those discussions through Chambers Ireland. Because Government were



Martin Shanahan, CEO of IDA Ireland and Kenny Deery, Galway Chamber - Both groups work together for the benefit of the region

trying to do so many things and were not getting accurate data from the ground, the Chambers Ireland network was able to get live information back to Government. This resulted in some of the restart grants and some of those new schemes being rolled out in the way they were at the time.

The need to inform businesses

"In Galway, although there was a great take-up of the restart grants, there was still more than €7million missed in the first round of restart whereby Galway businesses did not apply to the funding that was available to them. So more and more, the role of the Chamber is to educate our members about the schemes that are available to them.

"Through Revenue Warehousing, Revenue has assured businesses severely impacted by COVID-19 that it will continue to work with them to agree payment arrangements that support both the capacity of the business to resume trading as well as the national

recovery, post COVID-19.

"This is a big scheme if people use it right as you retain the ability to keep cash flow running through your business; and your payments to Revenue under PAYE and VAT can be deferred to next June or in some cases later, so you can arrange a payment plan. I would much prefer if businesses would do that rather than run out of cash next February and close their doors," he said.

"People are aware of them at a higher level but are not engaging with Revenue as they should be, file their returns and free their payments until next year. To give credit to Revenue, they really have staffed up and are very supportive of businesses that are engaging with them. There is just a traditional fear of Revenue, even when we were encouraging people to apply for restart grants, there was a reluctance to do because they felt that not paying their taxes would disqualify them. People had this fear that they were on the wrong side of the system and would not apply."

Galway Chamber has great faith in the resilience of Galway to bounce back after the restrictions of the pandemic are lifted and they play a key role in the initial behind the scenes discussions that precede the announcement of new sustainable companies coming to Galway.

Mr Deery said he is aware of the massive attribute that the cultural richness of Galway represents when attracting visitors and investors; and that what separates Galway from the other cities in Ireland is its huge cultural appreciation — an attribute that is highly regarded in culture-rich societies like Japan.

He said he is already aware of two investments in Galway which came

about as a result of casual contacts made at a Music for Galway launch this year — and he is confident that this is just the tip of the iceberg.

For now, Galway Chamber and its talented teams are focusing on getting Galway open again, sustaining its businesses, and helping create others through the Galway Technology Centre and Portershed initiatives.

As it appeals to locals to think Galway when shopping this Christmas, the Chamber do so knowing that helping our local businesses through this can open the door to the renewal of Galway as a retail and employment driver for the west, a hub that will benefit all.

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