



## **President of Kilkenny Chamber, Colin Ahern, addresses the Annual General Meeting of Kilkenny Chamber via Zoom, on Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2021**

I'd like to offer a very warm welcome to you all, for our 2021 Kilkenny Chamber of Commerce AGM, our second such AGM to be held online. Meeting in person again, at such an event and having lovely food, in a comfortable and welcoming setting, is not far away hopefully but this AGM has come a little too soon for that.

It has certainly been a very strange 10 months since I took over the position of President of the Chamber at our delayed AGM last June. Looking back at my introduction that day, it's safe to say that I underestimated the extent and length of time the effects of this Pandemic would have on our businesses and wider community. I spoke about how most of us would be delighted to see the back of 2020 and that 2021 would be our year of recovery. This has been the case for some but not all yet, I'm afraid. Indeed we have seen many businesses in the Retail sector around the country permanently closed and last month Failte Ireland published research suggesting that it could be 2025 before our tourism industry recovers to 2019 levels.

What struck me most about the last 14 months, however, is how resilient and innovative our businesses have been in dealing with the challenges of this awful Pandemic. The manner in which Kilkenny businesses adapted to ensure their survival and the safety of their customers and staff must be commended. This has not been the case nationwide and indeed Kilkenny has been widely commended in the media and is seen now as a leader in how businesses, communities and Local Authorities can work together, to navigate through and create a future, post COVID-19.

In any normal year the big news story would have been Brexit and whilst it has been overshadowed by COVID, it has been a huge challenge for exporters and the retail sector, in particular. When we stepped into the unknown at the beginning of the year, it was clear that most Irish businesses had prepared as well as they could have and had

taken the consequences of Brexit seriously from the onset. In Ireland, business will always find a way to do business and Irish people are better than most at that. The shipping lines that opened up nearly overnight from Ireland to mainland Europe have laid waste to the concept of our dependency to trade through the UK and I have no doubt that we will become an even stronger trading nation in the long run.

The activity of Kilkenny Chamber itself has been equally challenged by this Pandemic. Since March 2020, we have been unable to carry out many of our usual activities around networking, meetings & events.

However, whilst we had to halt and curtail some of our services, our other roles became more important than ever. As a representative and supportive organisation, our members needed our help. Faced with new and unique challenges imposed upon their businesses, this is where our Chamber has really stepped up.

Over the past 14 months our Chamber staff have worked tirelessly to ensure that the voice of business in Kilkenny has been heard. Both locally and through Chambers Ireland, we have lobbied Government Ministers, Senior Officials, County Councillors and the LA, to ensure that appropriate financial supports were made available to all, from central Government and the LA.

Last year the Chambers of Commerce made more Lobbying returns than IBEC, ISME and the IFA put together. Kilkenny Chamber has been at the heart of that throughout, attending meetings in the last number of months with An Taoiseach, An Tánaiste & the Minister for Finance, along with local TD's. Only last week we met with Minister of State Malcolm Noonan and secured his commitment to champion our cause in a number of key areas such as the Town Centre First Scheme, the TUSEI, N24 and the extension of the ring road.

Undeterred by the fact that our usual events were curtailed by the Pandemic, Kilkenny Chamber moved its networking events online and ramped up activity in this area. During the last year we ran more events than ever before, as our Chamber Chats were increased to keep our members engaged and informed. The attendance figures were a testament to the success of this increased activity.

Our hugely successful Golf Classic at the wonderful Mount Juliet Estate last year, showed what could be done safely and within HSE guidelines. Whilst we couldn't have a big dinner and prize giving, we did afford our members and their guests an

opportunity to network and engage with each other safely and appropriately. Congratulations to this year's winners the Heuristic Engineers Team.

We kept the legacy of our renowned Kilkenny Business Awards Gala Night alive, successfully running a standalone awards programme, which this year saw the President's Award go to Mr. Bobby Kerr and the Lifetime Achievement Award to Mrs. Kitty Donohoe. Without the support of our sponsors and media partners the Kilkenny People and KCLR this would not have been possible and I would like to thank them sincerely for their unwavering support in keeping this great event front and centre in 2020.

Last Christmas you would all have seen the wonderful new lights on the Parade and in collaboration with the LA and LEADER, it was the Chamber who made the application for almost €100k funding, which made this project possible.

We also drafted a very strong submission last month to the City & County Development Plan, which included observations and recommendations around Housing, Transport, Broadband, TUSEI, Tourism, Retail & the Public Realm.

Going forward, Kilkenny Chamber will continue to operate the Kilkenny Gift Voucher scheme which has ring fenced over €750,000 for Kilkenny businesses since its introduction. In 2020, we successfully collaborated with LEO and the LA to promote the scheme, increasing our voucher sales by 50%, to well over €200,000, in the process. The Kilkenny Gift Voucher is currently accepted in more than 150 outlets and I would encourage you all, if you are inclined to give a voucher as a gift, to choose the Kilkenny Gift Voucher and support local, shop local & click local where at all possible.

Before I finish, I would like to convey my sincere thanks to a number of people. Like every business this has been a really challenging year for the Chamber and I would like to thank John and Roisin for their hard work, dedication, flexibility and understanding. John told me yesterday that the last 12 months were "enjoyable in a weird way". I'm not sure I agree but I know what he means and we wouldn't be here without such strong leadership. I am very grateful to have both of them steering our ship. Without their help, the foresight of past Presidents and our experienced board, I have no doubt that we would be in a very different position right now and Gordon would be presenting a very different set of accounts in a few minutes. As a business dependant

on membership subscriptions, 2021 will be an even more challenging year for our Chamber but I'm positive we are in good hands.

I would like to thank you, the members, for the ongoing support of your Chamber and ask you to continue to recommend joining the Chamber to your business connections, so we can continue to strengthen our presence locally and lobby successfully on your behalf.

To the local media who have been so supportive in covering all our endeavours this year, thank you. I don't think John or I have been off the radio or out of the paper in any week.

A sincere thanks to our Treasurer Gordon Murphy and Past Treasurer Paschal Bergin, for their expertise, accuracy and the assured way in which they have guided us through the last year. Gordon will shortly be presenting our audited accounts for 2020.

Anyone who as ever acted as company secretary knows how pain staking and time consuming this role can be. Owen Sweeney has carried this out for a number of years now and we are very thankful for the time and effort that he puts in, ensuring we keep between the lines.

I don't think I've ever thanked anyone as much as I've thanked Marion Acreman over the last 10 months. In her role as President ex officio it's a measure of the woman how much I will miss her advice, common sense and encouragement. She's been a source of inspiration and motivation for me throughout my current tenure.

I'm really looking forward to working with and learning from Brian Keyes this year in his role of Vice President. Along with a wealth of business and media experience, Brian has a passion for Kilkenny like no other and I have no doubt he will bring a strong and unique personality to this role next year.

I would also like to sincerely thank all of our board members for their time and dedication to our Chamber. All of us do this on a voluntary basis and they've had to give up many lunch breaks and evenings at home to help guide our business through the last 12 months. It is thanks to their experience and strategic vision that we are in

a position to “drive on” now. I know it’s not always easy and we’ve had many challenges, disagreements and laughs along the way but I leave every board meeting having learnt something new and with a renewed vigour and motivation to succeed and that’s tells a lot about the quality of the people on our board. As a wise man once told me, the most successful people surround themselves with people who are more intelligent than they are.

So, the year ahead will be full of challenges, but it will also be full of opportunities. As always, through our engagement with our members, the Local Authority, Local Enterprise Office and support agencies such as the IDA, Enterprise Ireland, Failte Ireland and others, Kilkenny Chamber will continue to be the voice of business interests in Kilkenny and ensure that our City and County emerges in a safe and sustainable manner from this Pandemic and prepares to grow and prosper well into the future.

A real focus of the Chamber will continue to be our City, Towns & Villages and what we can do to protect their viability and vibrancy over the coming years. We will continue to lobby and work closely with the LA to ensure that no stone is left unturned in this regard and there is the right mix of focus on the People, Place and Policy of our City. I’ve said many times over the last year that I’m lucky enough to be able to live and work in such a wonderful County and I want my children to have the opportunity to do the same, should they choose to do so. A thriving and dynamic Kilkenny City inevitably leads to a place where people will want to work and live.

We will also look to develop and increase sales of our Kilkenny Gift Voucher even further. By doing this we can spread the #ShopKilkenny message throughout our County and protect our urban centres by changing shopping habits and introducing new customers to local businesses.

Finally, I look forward to engaging with you all in person, once again. I look forward to getting our lives back and to networking, collaborating & socialising. I look forward to a time in the not too distant future when all of our businesses will be open again and back to doing what they do best. I look forward to watching the new, exciting and unique developments of our public realm over the coming years and I’m really looking forward to giving the Chain of Office a good polish and a little more use than it’s had since last June.

Thank you for attending today and I’ll hand you back to John now.