

Downtown In Business

A STRONG VOICE WITH THE RIGHT CONNECTIONS

As Downtown in Business fast approaches its 20th anniversary – Insider asks what next for ‘the business club with influence’?



Frank McKenna

Insider caught up with the founder, group chairman and chief executive of Downtown in Business (DIB) Frank McKenna. McKenna was previously a politician who led the North West Regional Assembly, was deputy leader of Lancashire County Council and served as a Parliamentary assistant for seven years. He was described by us as ‘the most influential politician in the region’ before establishing the business organisation that was tagged as ‘the Chamber of Commerce with hair gel’ (again by us) in 2003.

Exclusively focused on Liverpool until 2007, the DIB brand has now been established in an additional eight locations: Lancashire, Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Cheshire, Wolverhampton, Newcastle and London, with plans of more to follow. “When I decided to set up Downtown back in 2003 a senior executive at Liverpool City Council told me we wouldn’t last five minutes. His comment has been a constant source of inspiration to me over the past two decades.” It is fair to say that when the politician-

“When I decided to set up Downtown back in 2003 a senior executive at Liverpool City Council told me we wouldn’t last five minutes. His comment has been a constant source of inspiration to me.”

turned private sector champion rocked up in Liverpool, he wasn’t exactly given the red-carpet treatment. “Quite the opposite. The City Council leadership actively tried to strangle the initiative at birth. They were directly contacting our member companies, telling them not to join. A very senior member of the council contacted David Wade Smith, then chair of the Chamber in Liverpool, to ask what could be done about us! It was an approach that eventually led to the collapse of what, overall, was a positive Mike Story-led administration. However, they couldn’t collaborate without being the senior, dominant partner, and they certainly couldn’t accept constructive criticism.

“I went to see Howard to ask him for help with setting up in Leeds. I knew he would have decent connections there. He said ‘Don’t go to Leeds, set up here. We need a disruptor, its all getting a bit cosy in Manchester.’”

“Ironically, DIB has seen six city chief executives come and go, two leaders, two mayors – and Wade Smith is now chairman of DIB Liverpool.”

Those early challenges seem a long time ago, and yet that lack of maturity in its dealings with private sector partners still plagues Liverpool, according to McKenna.

“I think a combination of a lack of confidence and Objective One funding, which the city benefited from for many years, means that we have seen a proliferation of Quangos and grant-reliant agencies spring up who are, quite naturally, at least as interested in securing their own future as they are about the growth of the city. And, after signs that the city council was beginning to have a more mature approach towards the business community from about 2008 to 2018, it has sadly gone backwards since then.”

To illustrate the difference between Manchester and Liverpool, McKenna

recalls a meeting with Sir Howard Bernstein back in 2009.

“I went to see Howard to ask him for help with setting up in Leeds. I knew he would have decent connections there. He said ‘don’t go to Leeds, set up here. We need a disruptor, its all getting a bit cosy in Manchester’.

“Howard introduced me to some influential Mancs, he spoke at our launch event, and the rest is history. But what a difference in attitude. In Liverpool, they tried to close us down. In Manchester, they encouraged us to establish our brand in the city. That demonstrates a confidence, maturity, and vision that perhaps no other city has quite matched as yet – although Birmingham is certainly getting there.”

Frustrations about Liverpool’s current challenges aside, what is driving McKenna and DIB beyond its 20th year in business?

“We now have a genuine national reach, while maintaining a strong voice in the cities and regions where we are located. The ambition now is for that regional voice to begin to influence more effectively at a national level.

“I don’t simply mean influencing policy. Connecting businesses across the country is the most important aspect of what we do for many of our 900 member companies, and we estimate that we have facilitated over £2bn worth of deals since 2003. That is influencing business and economic growth.

“We also have over 100,000 followers on our various social media channels that enable our members to raise awareness of their products. And we host north of 100 events across the country every year.

“Those core services – facilitating deals, networking events, and providing additional communication platforms to support our members, have enabled DIB to create a network that does have a voice with local and regional decision-makers, and increasingly at a national level too.”

Earlier this year, DIB hosted a series of events for Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer in Liverpool. They also organised a parliamentary reception in partnership with Manchester City Council to outline the case for HS2 to MPs. McKenna also regularly features on GB News’ weekend programme with Conservative MPs Esther McVey and Philip Davies.

“We now have a genuine national reach, whilst maintaining a strong voice in the cities and regions where we are located. The ambition now is for that regional voice to begin to influence more effectively at a national level.”

In 2023, DIB will host two national conferences – a regeneration event in Birmingham, and the Change Makers conference in Liverpool. A strong line-up of regional politicians and decision-makers, ministers and shadow ministers will be among the keynote speakers at DIB events next year.

The regional voice with a national reach ambition appears to be on track. “Yes” says McKenna. “We’re a 20-year overnight success.”

DIB is the fastest growing business organisation in the UK, working with decision-makers from over 1,000 companies across the country, in Liverpool, Lancashire, Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Cheshire, Wolverhampton, Newcastle and London, with more locations to follow. Through an extensive and exciting events programme and social media platforms, DIB connects members with other businesses who can help them grow – and we engage with senior politicians and officials at regional and national level to promote business-friendly policies.