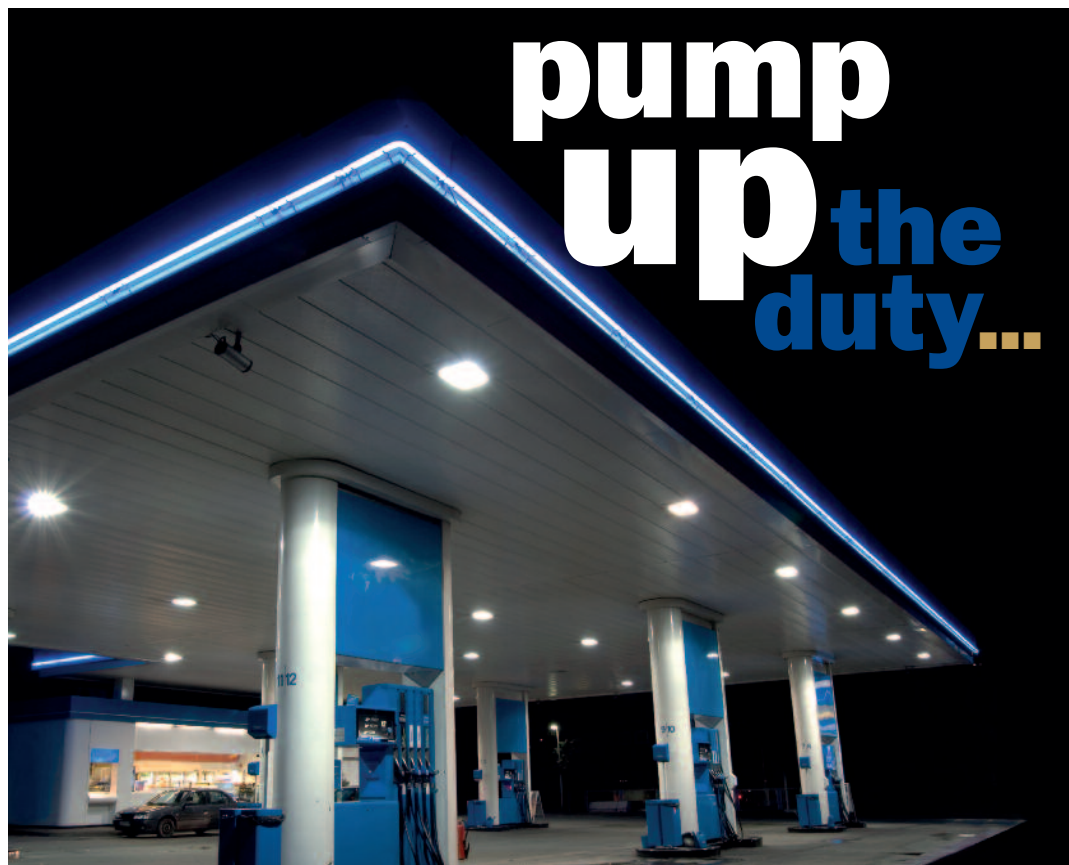




THE BUSINESS VOICE

FOR THAMES VALLEY

September | October 2011 • www.fsb.org.uk



■■■ Rises in fuel duty are stifling small firms and severely affecting the sectors that are crucial for economic growth.

Coupled with the fact that the downturn has hit small businesses hard and that GDP growth is weak, fuel duty is contributing to low business confidence. And with seven in 10 small firms relying on driving to run their business, the high cost of fuel is only adding to this burden.

Tax makes up 58 per cent of the price of fuel at the pump in the UK – one of the highest levels in the EU. And, in June this year, average petrol prices were the eighth highest in the EU, at 135 pence per litre.

Our research showed that nine in 10 small firms would be hit with a cost of up to £2,000 over the three months from March to May on top of regular outgoings from the increase in fuel. The FSB is also concerned that the manufacturing industry is being

severely affected – a key sector for economic growth.

Unlike big businesses, small firms are unable to absorb these extra costs. And so, in order to deal with them, 62 per cent of small businesses said at the beginning of 2011 that they would have to increase their prices if fuel continued to rise. Further, one in 10 small businesses thought they might have to lay off staff and a quarter said they will freeze wages. This is a huge concern with unemployment so high.

Earlier this year, the Government announced in its Budget a fair fuel stabiliser to balance rises in fuel duty and taxes.

However, it doesn't do what it is supposed to do, and since the Budget we have little or no change. The FSB is concerned that this stabiliser does not

offer any form of relief from the high level of tax on fuel. What it does is simply act to ensure there are no further increases.

The FSB has long been calling for an actual fuel duty stabiliser – a mechanism to ensure an automatic freeze on fuel duty increases and a reduction in duty to match any increases in VAT revenues from higher pump prices. This would ensure that any rises are kept to a minimum and small firms would not be faced with extra costs when they can ill afford it.

While the Government's measures will go some way towards helping hard-pressed businesses, a functioning fuel duty stabiliser must trigger an actual reduction in fuel duty. The Conservatives promised this while in Opposition and this is what small businesses need.

With fuel costs set to remain high, the Government needs to be held to task on its fuel duty stabiliser. We are doing all we can to lobby the Government and get a real fuel duty stabiliser in place. But we need your help too.

Contact your local MP and tell them why it is so important. To find your MP, go to <http://findyourmp.parliament.uk/>

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DEVELOPMENT MANAGER'S COLUMN ■■■

Welcome by Development Manager, Samantha Barker

First and foremost, I'd like to thank members for giving me such a very warm welcome to both the FSB and to the Thames Valley; as someone who joins the organisation not only as a new employee, but as a 'relocator' from the North West, it really has been great to see so many friendly faces in my first month on the job.

It's been a busy few weeks in region, not only as I get to know members and the area in more detail, but in terms of what we've already achieved. We've carried out a local survey on HS2, have played a key role in the launch of the Thames Valley Berkshire LEP and also have gained some phenomenal media coverage – none of which would have been possible without you – the members.

But all our good work doesn't stop there – we've still lots to do. This is a thriving and exciting region both in terms of its current business successes and potential moving forwards; yet with the UK's current economic climate still far from ideal, it's absolutely essential that the voices of SMEs across the Thames Valley are heard by key decision-makers.

As we start to build upon our lobbying plans moving forward, hearing about the things that matter most to you will be crucial in terms of driving forward the region's ability to influence local and national Government, so as to effect positive change for SMEs. We're always on the look-out for local case studies that highlight your key concerns; alternatively, should you wish to comment on any of the articles contained in this copy of Regional Voice, I would be happy to hear from you.

I am very much looking forward to working in the Thames Valley and hope to meet as many of you as possible in the coming months.

Samantha

HAVE YOUR SAY ON APPRENTICESHIPS ■■■

Do you currently employ an apprentice? Have you employed an apprentice in the past? Are you interested in employing one in the future, but are perhaps unsure where to start? If the answer is yes, then this is your chance to talk to Whitehall about your views.

The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) is interested in speaking to SMEs about apprenticeships in September and hopes to hold a series of focus groups on this important topic. Firms interested in getting involved should contact Samantha Barker at samantha.barker@fsb.org.uk for more information.

OXFORDSHIRE BRANCH CALL FOR NOMINATIONS FOR BRANCH OFFICERS ■■■

The Oxfordshire Branch of the FSB continues to work hard on behalf of SMEs in county, ensuring that the local small business community is heard by key decision-makers at all levels. This vibrant and active Committee is now seeking new members and is currently inviting applications for the positions of Secretary and Treasurer.

Members interested in these positions should, in the first instance, contact Margaret Coles, Chair of the Oxfordshire Branch at margaret@topfarmhouse.co.uk in order to express their interest and arrange a further informal chat about the roles.

South Bucks and Aylesbury Branch

NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AND CALL FOR NOMINATIONS FOR BRANCH OFFICERS AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS ■■■

The Annual General Meeting of the Federation of Small Businesses will be held at 18.30h on November 9th 2011 at Harding's Restaurant, Aylesbury College, Oxford Road, Aylesbury, Bucks HP21 8PD.

If you are interested in becoming involved with the Branch committee, nominations are now being called for officer positions and committee places. If you would like a nomination form please contact Linda Walton at lwaltonassociates@btinternet.com. Please note the closing date for nominations is September 21st 2011.

Completed forms must be returned to **Linda Walton at Marathon, Nags Head Lane, Great Missenden, Bucks HP16 0ER.**

READING AND WEST BERKSHIRE BRANCH CALL FOR NOMINATIONS FOR BRANCH OFFICERS ■■■

The Reading and West Berkshire Committee organises some excellent events and continues to be successful with local lobbying. To help the Branch continue with this good work, they are currently seeking nominations for new Committee members and as of October, the position of Chair will become vacant. If you would like to become an active member or would like to stand as Chair at the AGM in October, please do put your name forward and contact the Reading and West Berkshire Branch secretary, Paul Forrest at paul@eph.co.uk



WINNING FORMULA FOR THE WOKINGHAM CURRY CLUB ■■■

The East Berkshire branch of the FSB has cooked up a very special evening for FSB members in the region in the form of the Wokingham Curry Club.

Businesses from across the area can come along to The Sultan Palace Indian Restaurant in Wokingham, every second Wednesday of each month, to chat to likeminded businesses whilst enjoying a two course buffet curry.

Richard Knight, Vice Chair of the East Berkshire branch of the FSB said, "Local business people can get together to enjoy good food in good company. These evenings are a great success and we very much look forward to seeing lots of new faces at events in the future."

The cost of the evening is £13 and includes a first drink



OXFORDSHIRE AND BUCKINGHAMSHIRE BUSINESSES SAY NO TO HS2 ■■■

Following the much debated plans by Government to build a High Speed Rail network, the FSB recently surveyed its members in Thames Valley about their views on HS2.

HS2, which it is estimated would cost approximately £32bn, aims to reduce journey times from London to Birmingham to 49 minutes; and from London to Manchester and Leeds to around 80 minutes. However, members across Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire are unconvinced of the value of the build for their business.

At the time of going to press, the FSB Thames Valley survey had yielded some 254 responses from members in Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, with 87% of SMEs highlighting that they felt their business would not benefit from the creation of HS2. Furthermore, 75.6% of businesses said they would not use HS2 for business purposes at all.

Many local SMEs highlighted dismay at the idea of funds being diverted away from local rail upgrades, citing that an improvement in the existing rail system, especially the sub-regional rail network, would be far more beneficial to not only the local economy, but those areas beyond. "There is no point having a world class main line structure and a third world branch structure," said one member.

Improving existing roads were also cited as a key area for investment over HS2, with SMEs pointing out that for small businesses, transportation of goods from door to door was a key; some even went on to point out that, "many people will only use cars and vans...even after HS2."

"The cost is astronomical...UPGRADE our roads and give us the infrastructure we need to run our businesses efficiently."

An additional concern raised by some SMEs included the lack of intermediate stops. Although the track would run through parts of the region, local businesses would need to go via London or Birmingham, in order to benefit from the new, faster train service. Thames Valley FSB members felt this would, ironically, increase costs and journey times and thus, it was not a viable option for them.

"Those of us between London and Birmingham have no opportunity to use HS2; no stops means we can't use it to provide a better service for customers, either in them getting to us, or us getting to them. Additionally, it means there's more likelihood for businesses in this no stopping corridor to be bypassed. It will also cause massive disruption to local businesses during construction."

Many Thames Valley members were quick to point out that they saw an upgrade in electronic connectivity as more useful to their business needs, rather than the creation of HS2. As one member highlighted, "We are all working far more remotely these days and as communications are so easy and varied now - travelling to meetings is almost a thing of the past."

Other key findings from the research highlighted that 88.5% of respondents did not think HS2 would make them more likely to seek business in Manchester, Leeds or Birmingham and 92.1% were of the view that the creation of HS2 would not provide them with greater opportunities to recruit high calibre staff to their business.

FSB Thames Valley has submitted their findings to the Department for Transport, as part of the consultation process on HS2, which closed on July 29th 2011; The Secretary of State for Transport will announce the findings of the consultation and the Government's final decisions regarding HS2 in December 2011.

The region would especially like to thank those members who took the time to complete the survey and any members still wishing to give their views on HS2 should contact Samantha Barker, Development Manager, FSB Thames Valley on samantha.barker@fsb.org.uk

ON THE RIGHT ROAD TO ECONOMIC SUCCESS ■■■

July saw the launch of the Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership (TVB LEP), a partnership designed to promote economic prosperity in Berkshire and the surrounding areas.

Over 200 businesses attended a total of three roadshows, which took place in Newbury, Reading and Slough respectively and were supported by the FSB.

The LEP will concentrate on a number of areas, which are pivotal to growing the local economy; from ensuring residents have the skills that businesses demand, right through to making sure Thames Valley Berkshire's infrastructure is supportive of business growth for the future.

The partnership, the 35th of its kind in the country, is run by local businesses and supported by local authorities, the community and education sectors and central Government. The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) sees LEPs as key to building a world-class economy and helping to create the right conditions for firms to thrive. It is hoped that the LEP will grow the status of Thames Valley as one of the best places to live and work in the UK.

David Knowles-Leak, Regional Chairman of the FSB, heads up the Education, Employment and Skills section of the LEP, which aims to develop entrepreneurship and innovation in the area. He said, "Local Businesses need positive action to be taken in order to protect and grow the status of the Thames Valley and influencing this [the LEP's] agenda is one of the core activities of the FSB in the region."

Nicky Goringe Larkin, of the Reading and West Berkshire FSB Branch said, "Local FSB members are already campaigning extensively on many of the LEP's core objectives and have a wealth of knowledge to share with decision-makers moving forward."

The FSB will continue to work closely with the TV LEP over the next few months and encourages local members to share their thoughts and comments with the partnership moving forward.

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SOUTH BUCKS VICE CHAIR WINS AWARD FOR SERVICES TO SMALL BUSINESS COMMUNITY ■■■

Hilda Stearn, Vice Chair of the South Bucks branch of the FSB, has recently been awarded the District Council Chairman's Meritorious Award in recognition of her outstanding service to the community through small and medium enterprises.

Bill Bendyshe-Brown, the outgoing Chairman of Wycombe District Council, presented the award to Ms. Stearn at the Chairman's Reception in Wycombe Town Hall on 18th May this year.

Ms. Stearn played a key role in helping Mr. Bendyshe-Brown set up a number of business breakfasts across Bourne End, Marlow, Princes Risborough and High Wycombe. Some fifty businesses attended each event, in order to give their views on a number of topics that they felt affected them as small businesses.

The award recognises Ms Stearn's role in helping the council engage and work with SMEs across the area.

She said, "I am delighted to have received the award and look forward to working with Bill and his fellow councillors as we move forward."

ROB'S BRIGHT IDEA STEERS HIM TO SUCCESS ■■■

FSB member and keen yachtsman Rob Chicken, who sits on the Reading and West Berkshire branch of the FSB, has recently gained success from designing a new product aimed at improving the sailing experience for small crews everywhere.

Rob who is a qualified engineer noticed a need to steer his own boat automatically when sailing either single handed or with a small crew, especially during night-time.

Rob then put his engineering skills into practice and devised a mechanical answer to the problem, which not only addressed the issue, but produced a far more responsive solution.

Rob said, "I do quite a lot of sailing and the need for automatic steering seemed to crop up time and time again. Consequently, I thought I would try and come up with a new and innovative solution to the problem. I am really excited with the result."

Although there are other systems for boats which aim to address the issue of automatic steering, Rob noted that these mainly rely on electronics, which draw their power from the ship's battery.

"The rougher the sea, the more power they use. Consequently, in bad weather, the navigation lights and other essential electrical resources can be compromised. I wanted to create something that made my life as a yachtsman just that little bit easier, and safer; hopefully many other avid seafarers will benefit too!" Rob said.

With a finished demonstration unit and creating the name 'The Steersman,' Rob has finally brought this new invention to the market and will be exhibiting at the prestigious Southampton Boat Show in September.

Diary of EVENTS

For any of the events below, please contact Sue Day in the first instance, unless otherwise stated.

<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <p>7th Local Procurement Seminar - 09.00 - 11.30 a.m. Reading venue to be confirmed. Free event.</p> <p>9th at Hazlemere Golf Club - Thames Valley FSB Golf Day Enjoy a day's golf at this lovely course just outside High Wycombe. Open to golfers of all standards, a day of fun and excellent dining. Price to members including bacon roll, round of golf and dinner, £50 (non members £60), dinner only £25 (non members £27.50). Non refundable deposit £15 per person for those wishing to participate in the golf.</p> <p>14th Curry Club - second Wednesday of each month, Square Bar next to Sultan Palace in Wokingham Market Square. Runs from 6pm to 8pm. First course served at 6.30 p.m. Best place to park is Denmark St Car Park - free after 6.00pm. Cost for 2 course curry including first drink is £13 and can be paid by cash or credit card on the night. To book email richard@focal.co.uk</p>	<p>OCTOBER</p> <p>5th How do you take a photograph that will get you published by the press? Reading Chronicle, Reading. 6.00 p.m. - 8.30 p.m. Join some of the best press photographers in the region at the offices of the Reading Chronicle for this Master Class on press photography. Transform your press appeal with stunning photographs. Discover tips and learn the tricks that will elevate your photographs into images that will be snapped up by the media. FSB and Non Members - £5.00.</p> <p>12th Curry Club - second Wednesday of each month, Square Bar next to Sultan Palace in Wokingham Market Square. Runs from 6pm to 8pm. First course served at 6.30 p.m. Best place to park is Denmark St Car Park - free after 6.00pm. Cost for 2 course curry, including first drink is £13 and can be paid by cash or credit card on the night. To book email richard@focal.co.uk</p> <p>28th Breakfast with John Bercow 07.45 a.m. for 08.00 - 09.30 am.</p>
<p>15th Job Fair, Penta Hotel, Reading The Job Fair provides opportunities for Reading by bringing together the town's most important businesses and recruiters with its available work force. Repeating the successful formula of the last event, it will cost you nothing to secure a stand at the Reading Job Fair and in return you will gain free publicity from our media partners, the opportunity to promote your business and the chance to meet and greet potential new employees.</p> <p>20th Business Biscotti, Henley on Thames Third Tuesday of each month 10.00am - 12.00 midday. River and Rowing Museum, Mill Meadows, Henley on Thames, Oxon, RG9 1BF. No need to book. No charge, just the cost of your refreshment.</p> <p>29th Bracknell Business Club Always held at the Bull in High St Bracknell from 6.00pm to 8.00pm. Informal event - pop in for an hour, or for the duration. The event alternates between a Tuesday and a Thursday. FREE event, but please book via richard@focal.co.uk.</p>	