

Wealden business owners want to stay in the EU, but seek major changes

In or out?

The potential of a UK exit from the European Union could have an enormous impact on the nation's businesses, and Wealden Business Group is the latest forum to ask its members for their opinion on 'Brexit' - would they vote to stay in our out of the EU?

The WBG survey follows polls among members of the Institute of Directors and the CBI asking the same question. The results are almost identical - a significant majority favouring Britain's continued membership, but wanting changes to the country's relationship with the EU.

The 31-member Wealden Business Group, made up of owner-managers of SMEs across the Weald of Kent, voted 80% in favour of continued membership of the EU, but want a new deal to be secured ahead of the proposed 2017 national referendum on the issue.

Comments included:

- "Treaty change to ensure that sovereign nations' parliaments have the authority to opt out of any measure that they believe will have an impact on the success, culture or values of that nation."
- "Allow the UK parliament a veto over EU regulations in certain areas."
- "The need for the EU to have a greater understanding of the fact that business, and its taxes, provides the engine and funding for social policies - and therefore to support more, and interfere less".
- "Reduce our 'membership' fee".
- "End the uncertainty.....we should not be sabre-rattling on the sidelines, we are in Europe and are partners."
- "In 1975 we had a referendum on remaining in a free trade zone. We are now moving to a United States of Europe - we should never have given up our sovereignty and must reclaim it".
- "Unify the VAT systems, so you can reclaim VAT charged in other EU countries from the VAT payable in this country, and make the registration thresholds more consistent".
- "British government to be more protective of British infrastructure (eg energy supplies).

Some concern was expressed over immigration, with 20% of members wanting tighter controls, including immigration from EU countries.

Commented Wealden Business Group chair Dee Bateman: "In common with national business surveys on EU membership, our members clearly believe in 'the devil you know', and are concerned about the potential danger of exit.

"However they are lining up behind the Prime Minister in his negotiations to secure a new type of relationship, and to repatriate some powers to our own parliament."

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