

Commission for Rural Communities News Release: for immediate release

Images will be available

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Minister leads VIPs on digital fact-finding tour of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire

Hilary Benn, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, today (Monday 30 March) met with IT entrepreneurs in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire to show how digital technology is transforming rural economies and lifestyles.

The tour, arranged by the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), gives IT companies the opportunity to see firsthand how access to digital technology is crucial to realising the full potential of rural businesses. It is the latest in a series of successful Rural Experience visits designed to give senior executives a unique insight into current rural issues.

The delegates heard the hopes and concerns of rural businesses as the Government pursues its commitment to provide universal access to broadband by 2012. They first visited The Phone Co-op in Chipping Norton, the UK's only telecommunications co-operative, to discuss regulatory issues before moving on to Everyclick in Moreton-in-Marsh, a search engine which enables online charitable giving. Delegates also visited Oasis, a specialist tent hire company who have relocated from a cow shed at the bottom of a Gloucestershire garden to a business park in Moreton-in-Marsh to take advantage of a faster, more reliable internet connection.

Speaking ahead of the visit Hilary Benn said: "Technology has helped rural entrepreneurship to grow, and broadband is transforming lives, communities and jobs.

"I know that broadband is essential for rural communities and businesses. I will make sure that access for rural areas is a central part of government plans for the future of broadband."

Dr Stuart Burgess, Chairman of the CRC and the Government's Rural Advocate, explains: "Broadband take-up is growing quickly in rural areas as more and more people realise the potential of the internet to connect them with vital services and markets. Inequalities remain however, especially in the speed, quality and cost of services. Today's event demonstrates the creative ways people in rural communities are using digital technology, whilst also explaining the opportunities still waiting to be exploited.

"The future of broadband in these areas is a serious issue. Rural areas have seen some of the steepest rises in unemployment rates and high-speed, reliable broadband is essential for people looking for work and accessing benefits, and for businesses targeting new markets and seeking to reduce costs.

Dr Burgess concludes: "The companies we are meeting today are typical of many up and down the country who are bringing imagination and innovation to the challenges of rural unemployment and remoteness from essential services but they can't meet these alone. Public sector investment is vital to ensure that rural areas are not left out of plans for future generation broadband. Everyone attending today's event has a part to play in achieving this and I am delighted that so many key industry figures are able to experience for themselves the creativity of rural communities in meeting these challenges."

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For further information contact Rhian French on 01264 338375/07892 698 350.

Notes to editors:

1. Joining the Rural Experience were: Simon Bland, Chief Executive, Ruralnet UK; Jacqui Brookes, Chief Executive, Federation of Communications Services; Malcolm Corbett, Chief Executive, Community Broadband Network; Daniel Heery, Project Manager, Cybermoor Services Ltd; Melanie Harrison, UK Online Centre; Daniel Subhani, Managing Director, Pro-Net Internet Services; and Vivian Woodell, Chief Executive, The Phone Co-op.

2. The Phone Co-op is based at Elmsfield Business Centre, a former pig farm in Chipping Norton. It is the UK's only telecommunications co-operative, procuring telecommunications services on behalf of its customers, many of whom are cooperatives, charities and other not-for-profit organisations. www.thephone.coop

Everyclick based at Moreton-in- Marsh enables everyone to access effective and engaging ways to give online to any UK charity. Individuals, businesses, schools and colleges can use Everyclick to fundraise for their favourite charity in the way they want. www.everyclick.com

Oasis Specialist Tent Hire also based at Moreton-in- Marsh, Gloucestershire is an independent family-run business founded in 1996 providing genuine Bedouin tents and linings for marquees and interior theming for any event or occasion.

www.oasistents.co.uk

3. The CRC was established in April 2005 and became an independent body on 1 October 2006 following the enactment of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. The role of the CRC is to provide well-informed, independent advice to government and ensure that policies reflect the real needs and circumstances of people living and working in rural England. We give particular focus to tackling disadvantage and economic underperformance.

We have three key functions:

- Advocate: the voice for rural people, business and communities;
- Expert adviser: providing evidence-based, objective advice to government and others; and
- Independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

Further information about the CRC and its work can be found at:

www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk