



The Rural Experience: Digital Inclusion in Rural Areas

On Monday 30 March the Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, led the third Rural Experience on the theme of digital inclusion.

The event was held in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire and was designed to explore to how digital technology can be used to improve rural economies and lifestyles. He was joined by senior executives from across the IT sector including Jacqui Brookes, the Chief Executive of the Federation of Communication Services, Malcolm Corbett, the Chief Executive of the Community Broadband Network, Simon Bland, the Chief Executive of Ruralnet UK and Rakesh Murria, the director of strategy at Orange.

They began by visiting the PhoneCo-op in Chipping Norton (www.thephone.coop) to find out how the UK's only telecommunications co-operative is using digital technology to help rural people and businesses and to discuss the regulatory regime for mobiles and next generation networks.



Following the visit to the PhoneCo-op the delegates then moved on to Oasis Tents in Moreton-in-Marsh www.oasistents.co.uk. Oasis tents is a specialist tent hire company who have relocated from a cow shed at the bottom of a Gloucestershire garden to take advantage of the faster internet connection available at the Cotswold Business Park.

The final part of the visit was to Everyclick (www.everyclick.com) a search engine which enables on line charitable giving, again based in Moreton-in-Marsh.



Two strong themes emerged from the discussions. The first was the need to see the provision of next generation broadband and mobile technology as a utility which will significantly open up the potential of rural communities and businesses. And secondly was the value of community generated solutions to flourish from that core investment and to benefit many more rural people.

The results of the visit will be incorporated into the government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan, designed to deliver their Universal Service Agreement by 2012, and our forthcoming report to the Prime Minister and Lord Carter, the minister for communications, technology and broadcasting, on digital inclusion in rural areas.

