



CRC 06/09

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It's down to business as Alcester plays host to West Midlands' first-ever Rural Experience visit

The impact of the recession on rural areas will be in focus today (Friday 6 March) when the market town of Alcester plays host to the first-ever Rural Experience event to be held in the West Midlands. Organised by the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), the groundbreaking visit will be led by David Frost, Director General of the British Chambers of Commerce and will involve leading national and regional figures from Government, enterprise agencies and rural affairs.

The event is designed to highlight the issues facing rural communities in the current recession, including the impact of reduced services, retail closures in market towns, widespread job losses and the prospect of valuable skills being lost forever. It will highlight to the Prime Minister the crucial need for the same level of support and assistance given to victims of the recession in urban areas to be mirrored in rural locations.

Dr. Stuart Burgess, Chairman of the CRC and the Government's Rural Advocate, explained the importance of the visit: "It is easy to talk about issues and how they are affecting people from the comfort of the office, but there is nothing like going out to real places and talking to the people who are at the sharp end and learning from their experiences.

"I am delighted that David Frost is leading this Rural Experience event and has placed his support firmly behind rural communities, as it will highlight the problems they are facing and what help they need to emerge from the recession stronger than ever before."

The Rural Experience will start with a visit to Stratford-upon-Avon's Citizens Advice Bureau (where enquiries about redundancies went up 255 per cent in December), before travelling to Minerva Mill Business Centre in Alcester, which has been transformed from historic buildings housing traditional trades to a high quality innovation centre. Delegates will hear about the effects of the recession on the Mill's 34 businesses, and will also meet a number of companies based there and learn how they are coping with the recession.

"What we are trying to do is give a complete picture of the realities of rural life and following these visits we will also be taking in meetings at Longbarn Village and Ragley Estate to witness how the lack of retail demand is not just having a big impact on our major high streets, but also in our market towns and farm complexes," explained Stuart Burgess.

"There are still some success stories out there and the rural enterprise culture is still alive and well. None more so than the Purity Brewing company in Great Alne which has developed redundant farm buildings to create a 20-barrel brew plant and visitor centre, with its Pure Gold, Mad Goose and UBU ales bucking the downturn and recording healthy sales."

David Frost, who will lead the visit, concluded: "We need to ensure that rural business needs are not forgotten during the present recession. More support is needed to ensure many good rural firms survive this unprecedented period. This event will be an important step in bringing together people who work and support rural communities and businesses so they can see first-hand the most recent effects of the recession and what we can all do to help."

ENDS

For further information contact Russ Cockburn at Danks-Cockburn PR on 0781 2600271

Notes to editors:

1 Joining the Rural Experience will be: Adrian Gane (Country Land and Business Association), Alison McLean (CRC Commissioner), Bob Forster (West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum), David Hartley (Coventry and Warwickshire County Council), David Howatson (Government Office for the West Midlands), Eric Leenders (British Bankers' Association), Graham Garbutt (Chief Executive, Commission for Rural Communities), John Maples (Member of Parliament for Stratford-upon-Avon), John Scouller (Warwickshire County Council), Linda Walton (Federation of Small Businesses), Michael Oakes (Advantage West Midlands Board Member), and Polly Gibb (Women in Rural Enterprise).

2 The British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) is the national body for a powerful and influential network of accredited Chambers of Commerce across the UK. For further information visit: www.britishchambers.org.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 advisor: 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