

VALE BUSINESS FORUM

MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 15TH JANUARY 2009 AT THE METHODIST CHURCH HALL, DURSLEY

Speakers: Beri Hare – Principal Stroud College; Chris Hill, Business Development Unit, Stroud College and Emma Clark, ACL Coordinator, Stroud College

Beri Hare Principal Stroud College introduced herself and apologized on behalf of Peter Clegg, Vice Principal Stroud College who could not attend the evening talk. Beri explained to the Forum the background to the change of plan for Stroud College buying Drake House. She added that there was still great commitment from the College for services to Dursley and the College had served the Dursley Community well. Drake House is a magnificent opportunity, much work had been put into an extensive bid and planning application together with support from the RDA and LSC. The building would have had 3 main purposes: Flexible Learning, building construction unit and tenants but the College had withdrawn from the purchase as it was essential that the project was economically viable which it is not at this time. The planned 650 houses are not being built at present, the houses would have had a new bus route which was dependant on the houses being built and the College plans were dependant on both of these things happening.

There will now be 2 rooms rented at Drake House instead. If there is an upturn in the economy in two years or so the purchase will be reviewed.

Chris Hill, Stroud College, liaises with employers and advised that a new build construction centre on the Industrial area of the Littlecombe sites was to be built. It was currently in the planning stage and should be ready for training courses from September 2009.

Beri said she would look into contacting Sainsbury's to request a College direction notice being placed on their property as it was generally agreed that even local people are not aware of the location of Drake House.

Emma Clark, Stroud College, informed the Forum that leisure courses (e.g. languages, floristry, arts and crafts) and a flexible learning centre (iT) will operate at Drake House. Interest for Saturday attendance would be assessed as Saturday opening in Dursley had stopped some time ago.

Courses will commence next week at Drake House and an official opening will take place on Thursday 29th January, invitations were available at the end of the session. It should be noted by everyone that the Drake House property is patrolled by a private car parking contractor and the car parking spaces allocated to the College will be strictly 'policed' and College passes will have to be displayed at all times. Overflow parking would be available in the temporary long stay car park.

Shirley Hill enquired whether the Arts and Crafts section would like to make a sculpture for the Sculpture Trail, Emma said she would enquire with the tutor. Emma advised that 'Skills for Life' courses could be developed at Drake House.

Apprenticeships were discussed with Chris who advised that funding was dependant on age. The Construction Centre will attract apprenticeships and modern apprenticeships can commence at any time. Chris works with employers in the Business Development Unit which is involved with work placement for school leavers, training within a company, Health and Safety and personal development. Chris explained that in a recession the training budget is usually the one to be cut back and the importance of up skilling the employee. Help is there for those at risk of redundancy with CV writing, interview training and basic IT skills, also staff development. The College can be flexible in meeting training requirements. In some cases there is no charge for some level 2 and 3 training and Volunteer training is also available.

Job Clubs were discussed and Chris explained that job clubs had been taken back by Job Centre Plus – Connections etc. Emma stated that they would investigate what assistance could be offered.

The Forum was advised by GL11 representatives that there is a facility at the Treetops nursery for parents to search for employment information and that funding restricted GL11's ability to provide help and information on Saturdays and evenings and expressed concern over the loss of high profile locations for people to seek help, advice and training.

Emma talked further on the services that will be available from Drake House such as digital photography and Photoshop and a 3-week managing money course could be added. There is a need to target younger people of 18+, in particular young men. The student gender mix tends to be older females. There is a pilot course in Stroud for men 'Dad's matter' and it is hoped this course can be rolled out. If there is a definite demand for accounting courses such as SAGE arrangements may be made for Dursley to have this also, it is only available at Stroud at present.

The question of language courses arose and it was explained that these are available as recreational and courses leading to exams. They were available in Dursley at full cost, £70 being the figure quoted but they would need viable numbers to run.

Ann Wheeler from GL11 spoke about learning facilities available through GL11, for families as well as young teenagers. Additional facilities for the youth are being created in Cam and Dursley while waiting for the new build youth centre such as a new club called 'Bedlam' for the 13+'s . There is Reminiscence training to stimulate the mind and ease early memory loss. Locally the young people particularly want an internet café and this would be very popular, Emma commented there would have been one in Drake House if accommodation had been purchased for a new centre. It is possible that the IT centre in the Construction Skills Centre could be available for this purpose.

A question was raised with regard to gardening courses - GL11 does have a vegetable patch but there has been no uptake on gardening courses. Emma added this is also the case in Stroud but would be interested to know if there are kitchen facilities available locally for cookery courses.

Ann Wheeler from GL11 advised that GL11 engages with a number of local businesses to arrange free training but it is a charitable business so resources are limited. Shirley Hill added that the free First Aid, Food Safety etc. courses had been very popular. Funding was available for further courses at level 2 and requests had been received for level 3 courses but funding is not available and full cost is prohibitive to many businesses in the current economic climate. Vale Vision will advertise these courses in their window at 28 Long Street as soon as they have been organised. Vale Vision is working with GL11 with regard to this.

Shirley thanked the speakers for attending the Vale Business Forum and those present gave an appreciative applause. Shirley informed the Forum that Sainsbury's will be returning to address the Forum on March 5th. SWRDA will also be coming to address the Forum and their preferred date is also March so there may not be a February meeting. Information will be made available as soon as possible. Shirley added that Business Breakfasts and communication with Developers in the area may be a way forward for the Forum.

Shirley closed the meeting and advised that the Vale Business Forum web site has to be financially maintained and the Forum can only progress if members pay their subscription to the website. At £25 this represents excellent value in having a web presence.

Stroud College handed out a range of leaflets and posters with regard to courses available and the opening of the Dursley Centre at Drake house.

Flyers were made available for members regarding the 'Credit Crunch', information also available on the website. "GRCC has been asked to investigate the effects of the credit crunch on rural communities by the Commission for Rural Communities. If you have come across any evidence of this or are experiencing any difficulties yourself, please contact/ email Lesley Archer, Chief Executive at GRCC at lesleya@grcc.org.uk."