

It's time for change, says chamber leader

THE new chairman of the South West Chambers of Commerce has said the region's businesses need to be "more angry" over the way in which MPs and the Government have let them down.

Chris Slocock, who runs a second-generation family print and publishing firm in Wimborne, Dorset, warned that the region's small and medium-sized businesses would not see a shift away from increased taxes and squeezed margins until there was "political change".

He said: "This Government is on its last legs. Businesses at the moment are saying that things are very hard and that the Government is not helping.

"If SMEs are the backbone of the country and the Government wants us to move through the economy, then there must be more incentives to plan and invest.

"The expenses scandal has made the whole country angry, and given the country an opportunity to protest."

Mr Slocock said small and medium sized businesses needed to have a "strong voice at a national level", and that government needed fewer fat cat MPs and more political representatives with sound business sense.

Mr Slocock said the region's 10,000 members were becoming "increasingly active" within the South West's 130 chambers, despite increased workloads due to recession-based struggles and amassing amounts of red tape.

Referring to the chamber's reach from shop-floor level to the ear of government officials at national

CATHERINE BARNES

level, he said: "Where there are issues, people must raise them. People do have a voice, from the ground level right through to the top, through the local events and e-mail, through the South West Chamber of Commerce to the British Chamber.

"The mechanisms are here, and if there are issues that people want to raise, we want to hear them."

Mr Slocock also spoke of his ambition for a unitary approach between businesses and authorities in the region to press the case for a greatly improved transport infrastructure to support the region's tourism economy.

'Businesses are saying things are very hard and that the Government is not helping'

He said the issue of holiday traffic bottlenecking the A303 from World Heritage site Stonehenge to Penzance in particular needed properly resolving.

He said: "The South West will have to face many major challenges over the coming years, not least a growing transport crisis, but, working with other leading business organisations, I believe we can make a difference.

"The Government responds to those who shout the loudest. We have to get all regional bodies to agree to shout with one voice.

"Through the British Chamber, we have a joined-up link to Government.

"There needs to be a proper joined-up national strategy on transport, with problem areas identified with agreed solutions and a sequenced programme of priority funding developed.

"The Government must no longer be allowed to see road and transport schemes as single issues on their own, to be buried and put off because they are seen to be too expensive.

"The British Chambers of Commerce estimates congested roads cost the national economy some £24 billion a year.

"Working together we must make sure the South West is treated equally, that its businesses are taken seriously and that agreed solutions to such issues as transport problems are adequately funded."

Mr Slocock said strategies were also needed to encourage chambers of commerce at every level to see the development and support of tourism as essential to their core business activities and the life of their communities.

He said: "The current marketing support for the industry is confusing, overlapping and badly co-ordinated, plus there has been a 22 per cent cut in the VisitBritain budget since 1997.

"The bureaucratic and stifling planning system that makes it difficult, expensive and lengthy for tourism businesses to invest and develop attractions must be improved."

Mr Slocock is also a non-executive director on the Dorset Business Board and serves as director of the British Chambers of Commerce, as its business representative for the South West. He has taken over as South West chairman from Neill Mitchell.