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Hertfordshire funeral directors claim East of England 'Business of the Year' prize at the Chamber Awards 2012

A 300 year-old funeral directors has secured a prestigious achievement for Hertfordshire after it was announced as the Chamber Awards 2012's Business of the Year for the East of England (sponsored by Westfield Health).

Austin's, which employs 41 people across its business, made it a double celebration with its Managing Director Claire Austin beating off competition from across the region to be named as Entrepreneur of the Year.

Judges were impressed with the company's ability to grow turnover by 98% over the last decade and its ambitious growth plans that will see the relocation of all its branches to retail locations with open and elegant frontages.

The independent funeral directors, who are members of Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce, has also introduced a strong corporate identity that is visible and recognised in the local community.

There were seven other winners from the East of England, including a bespoke minibus converter, an eco-friendly hotel and a global leader in digital radio products and business critical communications.

The full list of Award winners includes:

- Ashbourne Insurance Group (Commitment to People Development)
- Holiday Inn (Sustainability Award)
- Mirage Health Group (Achievement in International Business)
- Pure Resource Solutions (Marketing Campaign of the Year)
- Qton Solutions (Most Promising New Business)
- Sepura (Excellence in Innovation)
- Warnerbus (Excellence in Customer Service)

President of the British Chambers of Commerce Martyn Pellew said: "There has never been a more important time for businesses to showcase the amazing work they are doing on a day-to-day basis.

“The Chamber Awards is a perfect platform for them to do just that and receive the recognition and profile they deserve for helping move the economy forward and create employment, often in local areas.”

The British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) Chamber Awards 2012 is committed to finding the best businesses in Britain through a series of regional heats followed by a National Final, due to be held at London’s Guildhall on November 29th.

Now in its 9th year, the competition is one of the showcase events for the ‘Business is Good for Britain’ campaign that highlights the role of business as a positive force for the UK recovery and the success of local communities and individuals.

Austin’s is the leading independent funeral directors in Hertfordshire, arranging 1200 funerals across its eight branches ever year. It also owns and operates Harwood Park Crematorium in Stevenage, which carried out over 2,200 cremations in the last twelve months.

The company has focused on ensuring it offers a level of service that sets it apart from its national competitors.

It has used client feedback and a mystery shopper review to introduce a number of innovations for the sector, including the free Little Green Book, 24/7 availability and the development of a bespoke pre-paid funeral plan.

Austin’s, along with the seven other winners, will now represent the East of England in their respective categories in the Grand Final, with the chance to win £25,000 and the title of “Outstanding Business Achievement”, courtesy of the RBS Group.

Martyn concluded: “A record number of firms have taken part this year, all determined to prove that ‘Business is Good for Britain!’”

The Chamber Awards 2012 is supported by the RBS Group, BT Business, Dell, DHL Express, Westfield Health and Acua Limited.

For further information or to book your place at the National Awards Final, visit **www.chamberawards.co.uk**

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For further information, please contact Russ Cockburn on 07812 600271 or email russ@dc-pr.co.uk

Notes to Editors

Breakdown on the other winners:

Ashbourne Insurance (Commitment to People Development) – The family-run independent high street broker offers a one-stop service, from personal and complex commercial insurances to 24-hour claims advisory support.

It has developed the 'Ashbourne Way', which focuses on continuous staff training, retention of employees and the development of high performance managers.

Last year, the firm spent approximately £20,000 on training and over 1,000 hours on staff development, including classroom and on-the-job training with mentors.

'People power' has played a major role in Ashbourne Insurance defying the online competition to grow turnover to nearly £1.2m last year.

Holiday Inn Stevenage (Sustainability Award) – Located in the heart of Stevenage Town Centre, the hotel has 140 guestrooms and conference and events facilities for up to 400 delegates.

It benefits hugely from being within a 25-minute direct train link to London and this has resulted in steady year-on-year growth.

In 2011, Holiday Inn Stevenage embraced the low carbon agenda, creating a green working party and electing an Energy Champion that would help the business achieve its aim of securing a 'silver' status in the Green Tourism Business Award.

By empowering all of its 65 staff, the company was able to develop a 'Green Screen' noticeboard and a host of forums that were responsible for the introduction of the Responsible Visitor Charter, recycling cartridges in support of Guide Dogs for the Blind and the conversion of 65% of public areas to LED lighting.

The results have been impressive, with Holiday Inn Stevenage reducing its carbon footprint and going one better by actually securing the 'Gold' status.

Mirage Health Group (Achievement in International Business) – Mirage Health Group specialises in the provision of ear care products that allow clinicians to carry out safe and effective ear care in accordance with medical guidelines.

The range is centred on the 'Propulse Ear Irrigator', which has been the irrigator of choice for health care professionals in the UK for over 10 years. Complementary accessories have been designed and launched including disposable tips, carry case, head lamp, cleaning tablets and cape.

Based at its facility in Welywn Garden City, the innovative company works with end users (i.e. practice nurses and hospitals) and medical distributors, with expansion coming from its growing international reputation.

Mirage, which employs 9 people, currently serves 16 different countries and has seen exports increase to £265,000 in the last financial year.

Pure Resourcing Solutions (Marketing Campaign of the Year) – Established in 2002, Pure Resourcing Solutions (PRS) specialises in permanent and temporary recruitment and retention solutions for public and private companies across the East of England.

It has established itself as a leader in the accountancy, financial services, HR, marketing and office recruitment markets, offering complementary services including assessment centres, psychometric testing and salary benchmarking.

The company has enjoyed significant success with the launch of its 'Best Employers Eastern Region' campaign, which involves a survey that explores a company's culture and values.

Using a mix of PR, branding, marketing collateral, social media and direct marketing, PRS is expecting to engage with more than 100 businesses and has already signed up a number of new customers as a result of this marketing drive.

Qton Solutions (Most Promising New Business) – Qton Solutions was founded in 2010 by former Nokia employee Phil Nunn to help non-Governmental organisations communicate more effectively with rural communities in East Africa.

Its early success has been down to its ability to spot an opportunity in the marketplace and the company has been quick to evolve its offer, moving away from hosted email solutions and fixed line contracts to focus on demand for software development and consultancy.

Qton's current portfolio focuses on databases, intranets, CRM, ERP, business intelligence and fundraising solutions, all geared towards helping clients streamline processes, enhance efficiencies and enable growth.

The expectation is for turnover to increase 100% this year with sales due to reach £250,000.

Sepura (Excellence in Innovation) – The company is a global leader in TETRA digital radio products, delivering mission-critical communications to customers in the public safety, military, transport, utilities and commercial sectors.

It goes into its 10th year of business employing 300 people and turning over €83million, with major global interest in its latest groundbreaking product.

Sepura was set the challenge of developing a TETRA radio that would enable users to safely take the reliability and security benefits beyond public safety markets and into hazardous environments.

The result was the launch of the STP8x, which went into full production in March 2012. Sepura has already secured a number of significant orders from a diverse range of customers, including an open cast mine, a fire brigade, a pharmaceutical company and a police force in the UK.

Warnerbus (Excellence in Customer Service) – Warnerbus provides bespoke minibus conversions to individuals, care homes, schools and local authorities, tailoring vehicles to include wheelchair access, side entrance, handrails, strengthened floors and various safety features.

The company has successfully overcome Government cut-backs that wiped out 80% of its customer base by focusing on what it does best...offering unbeatable quality and customer service.

This involved safety testing all conversions to Department of Transport standards, securing accreditation status from Renault and launching the 'Driving-Quality' campaign. The latter involves a dedicated website, which offers free exposure to Charities and safety training on existing vehicles.

Warnerbus has also invested heavily in its staff to ensure the highest standards of customer service, with measures ranging from ISO training and weekly meetings to setting KPIs and staff incentives.

About the British Chambers of Commerce

The British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) is the national voice of local business.

The BCC sits at the heart of a powerful nationwide network of Accredited Chambers of Commerce, serving over **100,000 businesses** across the UK, which **employ over five million people**.

For more information visit: www.britishchambers.org.uk