

Energy bills warning sounded

THE energy-price problem is threatening to be one of the worst pressures on businesses since the oil crisis of the 1970s, the North-East Chamber of Commerce has warned.

Companies' fuel bills have soared as worldwide demand has pushed up the cost of gas and oil.

The knock-on effect has already been cited as a prime factor behind two North-East companies – Circatex and Vald Birn – going into administration this month.

NECC policy director Andrew Sugden said: "Demand for energy and raw materials in emerging economies such as China and India, combined with harsh winters and natural disasters, has left businesses worldwide having to contend with a meteoric rise in fuel costs.

"Energy is now more of a concern than at any time since the oil crisis of the 1970s. The Government has an enormous task trying to solve this headache.

"It needs to act fast to develop a balanced portfolio of energy sources. We all have a responsibility to ensure we are being as energy-efficient as we can."



FIZZING: Fiona Wilson, director of Lovely Bubbly, which is supplying Champagne to the French Consul. The firm was officially launched last night.

Lovely firm beats French at their own game

FORGET about selling coals to Newcastle – a Tyneside business is selling Champagne to the French.

Lovely Bubbly, started by the daughter of former Newcastle Breweries boss Alistair Wilson, has clinched a deal to supply Champagne to the French Consul in

Edinburgh. Lovely Bubbly director Fiona Wilson said: "Obviously you would expect the French Consulate to know a thing or two about Champagne, so it is a ringing endorsement of our business that they have asked us to supply them."

Lovely Bubbly, of

Newcastle, was set up to give UK drinkers access to quality Champagnes from smaller French producers.

The company has already signed several exclusive supply deals with producers in the Champagne region of France, around Reims.

The company was

launched last night at Newcastle's Biscuit Factory.

Clients so far include Stanley engineering company Tanfield Group, video games company Namco Europe, Hooker & Young hair stylists and PricewaterhouseCoopers, both in Newcastle.

TV is a turn-on for net users

BUSINESS is booming at an online music company after starring in a BBC documentary.

Beatsuite.com, of Newcastle, has seen orders for its royalty-free music flood in from the US, Asia and Europe after it was featured in *Net Profits*, a News 24 documentary.

The programme looked at how the internet has changed British industry and how some companies are switching from traditional industries to the technology sector.

It was shown worldwide earlier this month, prompting the rapid rise in orders to Beatsuite's website www.beatsuite.com.

The company was chosen for the show after winning Best Use of Broadband in the North-East E-Commerce Awards in October.

Beatsuite.com managing director Steve Bainbridge said: "The music library has been very busy since the show aired and we've had lots of interest from companies in the UK as well as South Africa, Sweden, the Netherlands, and even as far a field as India and Nepal.

"We've even attracted interest from the BBC itself as a potential customer.

"The corporation is looking at using some of our music for its online education work."

Mr Bainbridge, a DJ and music composer, launched Beatsuite.com in November 2004 to provide businesses with access to high quality, royalty-free music.

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National Grid cash fires up Longhirst

By Iain Laing

TRAINING company The Longhirst Group has won £7.5m worth of contracts as it aims to boost its revenues by 150% in five years.

The Northumberland business, which this month revealed it was aiming for £50m turnover by 2010, has won three-year deals to provide training for the National Grid.

The contracts, which are together worth £7.5m, cover the areas of health and safety, gas distribution and operations and modern apprenticeship programmes.

They will be delivered by the Gas Training Business Unit across the UK.

Stephen Cowell, chief executive of

the group – which trades under the Develop name – said: "This is a tremendous success for Develop and confirms our position as the leading training provider to the utility sector.

"Our gas business has grown substantially in recent months.

"To have secured these prestigious contracts from National Grid is tremendous and reflects much hard work and expertise from our team."

The Cramlington company said its expansion plan would add another 150 staff to its 350-strong nationwide

workforce. It has expanded rapidly in the past three years since being bought out of the now-defunct Northumberland TEC.

It is already a £20m turnover business and is ambitious to grow its three divisions – technical skills training, personal and corporate development, and venues – both organically and by acquisition.

Mr Cowell said Develop already ran apprenticeship programmes for National Grid and United Utilities and was looking to grow in transportation, with rail and bus work, and in health and safety, through securing more consultancy and other "higher level" work.

In property services, the company

is working on expanding in the health and defence sectors.

Aside from technical skills, Longhirst's venues division may also grow and Mr Cowell has said that if Longhirst comes across a training company with a residential facility as an acquisition target, then that "could be a good fit for us".

In 2004, the company bought south coast rival WTI in a multi-million pound deal which added about £15m to its turnover.

WTI was formerly the public sector Water Industry Training Board.

Since the privatisation of water it had diversified as an independent company into serving various other utilities.