

## Partners aim to fill gap left by Vauxhall

CLOSING Vauxhall has caused shock waves over a much wider area than Luton and the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) is rushing to close the employment gap.

It has joined a group of organisations to tackle the economic situation in Luton, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire caused by General Motors' thunderbolt decision to shut the plant.

The Luton Vauxhall Partnership also includes Vauxhall itself, Luton Borough Council, the Employment Service, the Benefits Agency and Bedfordshire and Luton Chamber of Commerce.

The prime objective is to bring new employers into the county to take up the slack when the plant closes next year.

The organisations are seeking funding to support Vauxhall workers and the wider economy.

The partnership will be chaired by Neville Rayner, deputy chairman of EEDA, who said: "Although Luton has been dealt a severe blow, EEDA and its partners are working hard to bring opportunities into the area."

# Innovation in-Spires a French revolution

**MID the dire news of Vauxhall job losses, there is a small ray of sunshine on the Luton job scene.**

It comes in the unlikely form of the Spires Innovations Centre in Adelaide Street, where two French technology companies have set themselves up and an American firm is about to follow.

French techies to Luton? Almost as bizarre as igloos in the Sahara.

But there is good Gallic logic in their choice. The British tax regime is more favourable, and easyJet's budget fares make it economical for them to commute from Geneva Airport – just over the border from their homes – to Luton.

The two companies are totally different. Emotions produces what is destined to be a party craze: glasses which light up internally when liquid is poured into them. Emotions is using the same technology to provide balls for swimming pools which light up in contact with the water.

The other French company, Zetec, is working in high speed internet connections.

The American company Parlant Technology is every errant schoolboy's nightmare. It produces software which can let parents know if their child is late for school or playing truant.

One UK company at the Spires is Doyle International Ltd, which makes a high-tech



■ The Spires centre includes firms run by (from left) Michael Hodgkinson, Karen Braine, Darren Hodgkinson, Kelvin Doyle and Katia Febrissy

knee support that has been adopted enthusiastically by international ski teams.

The knee is the biggest and most complex joint in the body and skiing is very hard on it. Once a knee is operated on, it never gets back more than 80 per cent of its functionality – at best. Designer Kelvin Doyle says the support takes much of the fear of knee injury away from sportsmen.

Spires is run by a board, with representatives from Luton Council, Luton University, the East of England Development Association, Business Link and Luton and Dunstable Partnership. They interview candidates wanting to occupy the serviced

workspace and the criteria are that they must have a good business plan involving development or use of technology.

The Innovation Centre has run out of units and is expanding to the Britannia Building in Leagrave Road. Mike Anstey, head of the centre, said: "People don't think of Luton in technology terms. When the 'Arc' project was set up, to develop a technological swathe from Cambridge through Bedford to Oxford, Luton was left off the map. I protested and now we are included.

"Vauxhall was a body-blow to Luton but we could become a high-technology centre because of our ease of communications."

## Forget the buses – link towns by train

TRAINS, not buses, are the answer to the Luton-Dunstable link, according to the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB).

Luton council has put forward the Translink bus scheme as its answer to traffic jams between the two towns, with guided buses using the former railway line route.

But Gordon Hill, policy chairman for FSB eastern region, believes the train alternative of local transport pressure group Adapt is better.

Adapt has already tested a locomotive over a stretch of track cleared by volunteers. "Guided busways are still unproven," Mr Hill said.

He claims a two-lane motorway can carry about 7,500 passengers an hour, while a railway can handle up to 40,000 in the same space. Trams fall well below this and buses come last – and can break down.

"They suffer hold-ups and bunching and will cause delays from congestion and road-works," added Mr Hill.

"FSB has no prejudices. Members simply want a solution that will work."