

Rural Broadband in the West Midlands

The West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum (WMRAF) has a number of priorities for the rural areas of the West Midlands. Access to high speed broadband is one of these; it is essential in the drive for economic success and social progress. Poor broadband service is not restricted to the remoter parts of the West Midlands; pockets of poor performance can be found in many rural areas.

Why is high speed broadband important in the rural West Midlands?

Equity of access to high speed broadband is essential to ensure competitiveness and is necessary for modern business and communications. There is also an increasing reliance on the internet and innovative technologies by public bodies and voluntary organisations in delivering services.

Government policy has been to make the UK the most extensive competitive broadband market by 2005 with an overall target speed of 2 Megabits per second, (2Mbps). There is still some way to go towards this target and many rural areas in particular lag behind. This target itself will rapidly become obsolete with increased expectations and demands for use.

The Coalition Government recognises the importance of developing high speed broadband in rural areas. It has recently announced that parts of Herefordshire will be the venue for one of four pilot projects to roll out super fast broadband to places with low population density. This is in preparation for a £530 million project to help upgrade areas of Britain that the broadband market alone would not meet.

What are the issues?

- Customer experience from rural areas does not reflect the industry's claim that the West Midlands is well served by broadband. There are a number of localised problems such as poor upload speeds, inconsistent download speeds, line length between exchange and user and limited competition in ISPs, the Internet Service Providers.
- Anyone living more than 2.5 miles from an exchange is unlikely to get a good high speed connection from a telephone.
- Limited competition in terms of ISPs persists, despite de-regulation. This is partly due to the smaller markets in rural areas, but also to poor take up and low demand from rural businesses.
- Spatial and demographic differences in rural areas of the West Midlands mean that there is no homogenous 'one size fits all' solution.
- Larger scale infrastructure provision is often not viable for commercial operators. However, innovative and entrepreneurial solutions and partnerships between local authorities, local business and communities can succeed where the larger providers cannot.

Martley Web Mesh: community enterprise

Martley in Worcestershire experienced poor broadband connectivity in difficult geographic conditions. Martley Web Mesh is a non-profit co-operative enterprise set up to deliver broadband in Martley and surrounding settlements. Using wireless technology it currently services over 100 computers, including local businesses, without the need for major and expensive investment in telephone line capacity. Subscribers pay an initial connection fee and a reasonable monthly payment thereafter.

What needs to be done?

1. Address technical challenges regarding supply through a range of solutions, suitable for particular circumstances.

Churches as relay stations: an innovative solution

The Diocese of Hereford and local company Allpay have forged an agreement to use church towers and steeples as relay stations. The system will use cereal box sized receivers which will have minimal effect on the architecture and heritage of church buildings. The project will enable high speed broadband to reach remote areas of Herefordshire without the need for telecommunications masts or cables.

2. Policy and intervention should look well beyond the 2Mbps target. The next 5-10 years will see increased expectations and demands for broadband use and next generation access.
3. Improve competition through local loop unbundling (i.e. give multiple providers access to connections from telephone exchanges to customers' premises).
4. Stimulate better demand and take up amongst many rural businesses, which are often small or micro companies. Build greater capacity and raise awareness and skill levels in order to make best use of the opportunities offered by broadband and innovative technologies.
5. Quantify demand to ISPs and commercial operators. They will require a clear understanding of level of demand and potential customer base before investing. The scale of investment is significantly higher for next generation technologies and providers will need to see evidence of clear commitment by customers.

6. Help build partnerships between the public and private sectors and community groups to achieve local solutions which fit local circumstances. Local Enterprise Partnerships can be important agents in such facilitation.
7. Prioritise future investment where the greatest impact can be made. In a climate of diminishing resources, this is best focused on the region's market towns and rural centres where there is greatest potential for economic growth, where services are based and which have the ability to act as hubs for broadband infrastructure.

Project Focus Rural Broadband: public sector impetus

Developed in the West Midlands Rural Regeneration Zone, this project provides wireless broadband to a triangle of 40 square miles between Leominster, Tenbury Wells and Ludlow. It provides 2Mbps across the area, but companies requiring higher specification can access over 10Mbps. It aims to have 250 companies using it by 2013. It will be self-sustaining following an initial £200,000 investment from the Rural Development Programme (RDPE) as part of the European Economic Recovery Plan.

Further Information

For further information, evidence and additional examples and case studies, see:

Rural Broadband Infrastructure Study in the West Midlands. July 2010

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