

# Thursday, February 17, 2011

## [Conference report: Herefordshire Broadband Summit 2](#)

[Save to delicious](#) Saved by 0 users

Last Friday (11th February) I attended Herefordshire's Broadband Summit 2. Organised by [Fast Broadband 4 Herefordshire](#), the event was convened to explore the county's options and opportunities in relation to its selection as one of Broadband Delivery UK's (BDUK's) four pilot projects (the other three being North Yorkshire, Cumbria and the Highlands and Islands).

Herefordshire County Council set out its broadband strategy the same week as the conference, as discussed in this previous [post](#). The conference was opened by Robert Sullivan, Chief Executive of [BDUK](#), who provided the background and context to the pilots. BDUK is hoping that Herefordshire will provide some lessons on how to ensure the commercial viability of rural broadband roll-outs, and is also interested in both the county's cross-border (the plan extends into Gloucestershire and Wales too) and cross-sector intentions (in relation to healthcare in particular).

"At least" £5m will be provided for the project, according to Herefordshire's strategy. £50m will be allocated by BDUK for additional wave 2 pilots. Bidding guidance for these will be available in early March 2011, with bids due in late April and selection by late May. More funding will follow later in 2011. Crucial to securing future BDUK funding is the creation of a local broadband plan, which should set out a strategic approach, address demand stimulation ("demand programmes will be important to deliver sustainable revenue") and also link to existing initiatives and networks ("investigate the re-use of public sector networks to reduce the cost of rolling out superfast broadband infrastructure in your council area").

More on BDUK's future plans is available in two previous presentations by Robert Sullivan from November 2010, one to the Westminster eForum and available [here](#) and the other to the [NextGen10](#) conference. Natalia Silver from Herefordshire County Council spoke next, setting out the council's vision for broadband. Services must be affordable, and the council intends to "work with communities to find local solutions to broadband coverage" – such as farmers digging in fibre across their fields. In terms of the opportunity NGA broadband presents, Natalia pointed out that Herefordshire doesn't have a university, so broadband presents a possible new way to access higher education services without having to travel outside the county. An interesting consideration in relation to the current debate about rising tuition fees?

The intention is to deliver to 90% of homes and businesses by 2015, providing a network that ISPs can use to reach customers (so open access?) based on fibre and other solutions as appropriate. A commercial partner will be sought shortly via a competitive exercise, and offers of further input to develop the tender documentation were welcomed. Phase 1 will focus on Herefordshire's borders with Gloucestershire and into Wales, essentially a band to the south of the county. There was some disappointment expressed by a number of audience members who felt that the pilot didn't go far enough in terms of coverage and was also too slow in terms of roll-out, further evidence (as if it were needed) of the pent up demand for high quality broadband access in rural areas.

The next session covered developments in rural broadband delivery. Nick Peplow described [Allpay's](#) wireless broadband service (also mentioned [here](#)), which builds out its service to villages using church towers and spires. Torbjörn Eriksen of the Open Networks Exchange (ONEX, the successor to the JON Exchange?) then explained how ONEX will provide a means to interconnect and deliver services across multiple networks, an important consideration if local, community-built networks are to offer an experience comparable to that provided by large telco's networks.

All of which reminded me of an enquiry I once received from a school, as part of my previous life. The school in question wanted to subscribe to a package of learning materials and resources provided by a regional broadband consortium (RBC) elsewhere in the country, i.e. other than the one it was a member of. A perfectly reasonable question, given that the interconnection of RBC networks via the SuperJANET backbone makes this theoretically possible, but not currently practical, given the way connectivity and services are currently bundled for schools. There are some lessons for education here perhaps – separating the provision of connectivity (which is best delivered locally) from the provision of services (which could be delivered from anywhere, bandwidth permitting) would provide schools with a greater degree of local choice? The difficult bit would be preventing carefully worked out school broadband costs from unravelling completely of course.



Anyway, back to Herefordshire...Dale Barnes of Virgin Media spoke next, reporting on Virgin Media's trialling of RFoG (radio frequency over glass) technology. Essentially, this provides a means to deliver a range of services over a single fibre, requiring only different equipment at customers' premises depending on their choice of service. So Virgin Media can deliver both BT's and its own NGA consumer services over a single fibre, proved as part of its trials of overhead fibre deployment via Western Power's electricity pylons in Cwmbran/Crumlin, South Wales. Interestingly, Dale stressed that Virgin Media has no interest in owning or managing the fibre in such instances. For obvious safety reasons the company would much prefer to leave that to the power company or distribution network operator (DNO).

Later sessions covered demand issues and case studies, with much frustration expressed both over the current state of broadband in Herefordshire and the perceived shortcomings of the strategy for the pilot. The potential impact of broadband on Herefordshire's economy was referenced throughout, with broadband described at one point as "the simple basic bedrock for economic regeneration". Case studies included BT's managed healthcare solution in [Wakefield](#) (memorably described by one beneficiary as "technology that stops you from being alone"), videoconferencing successes in Herefordshire schools and the constraints that the current lack of NGA creates for a local engineering firm. I thought this last one was particularly striking.

[Leading Edge Turbines](#) needs to exchange many large files with its manufacturers as part of the design process (for example, files detailing the stress analysis of a component may exceed 500MB), underlining the importance of symmetric connectivity and not just download speeds for businesses. The firm also provides a remote monitoring and diagnostic service for its products (which are often used in remote locations making engineer visits difficult and expensive), and will need to ensure sufficient bandwidth is available to support this service as the installed base of their products grows.

I thought this was another truly excellent example of how the broadband debate needs to move from the general (“broadband is a good thing”) to the specific – NGA levels of performance, capacity and reliability are needed to run the set of applications and services Leading Edge Turbines needs to be successful, or the company simply won’t be able to compete. See this previous [post](#) for more on this, based on examples from the healthcare sector in this instance.

Clear, irrefutable evidence is needed to demonstrate once and for all that NGA is about so much more than the iPlayer in HD, and also to show how NGA can bring about a panoply of long term benefits, cost savings and economic gains which far eclipse its initial installation costs. It would be terrific if BDUK’s pilots revealed loads more examples like this one, especially if the issues companies like Leading Edge Turbines currently face start to be addressed as a result of the pilots. Fingers crossed that they will.

Posted by Jon Hunt at [10:38 PM](#)  

## 2 comments:



[PhilT](#) said...

"Virgin Media can deliver both BT’s and its own NGA consumer services"

really ? I thought they were providing their standard broadband and TV offer over the fibre. Where does BT fit in.

[1:42 AM](#) 



[Jon Hunt](#) said...

Fibrestream mention this on their blog - "For the techies, VM are multiplexing 1550 + 1610 RFoG carried WDM style with GPON 1490 + 1310 i.e. RF and IP are shared on the same single medium" - see <http://www.fibrestream.co.uk/2011/02/08/utility-infrastructure-sharing-part-1/>

According to my notes, Dale confirmed that GPON service delivery trials over the fibre were successful, demonstrating that multiple services can be delivered over a single fibre. Also interesting in relation to Ofcom's VULA developments perhaps?