

## **Cotswolds communities join campaign for rural broadband**

Parishes and towns in the Cotswolds are throwing their weight behind a campaign to improve broadband services in rural Gloucestershire.

The Borders Broadband project is a multi-million pound initiative to secure private investment in a new fast broadband infrastructure for the county's rural areas.

As part of the campaign, a Gloucestershire-wide survey of households and businesses has been launched to show there is demand for fast broadband services in rural communities. (See [www.gfirst.co.uk/broadband](http://www.gfirst.co.uk/broadband))

And volunteer 'broadband champions' are being recruited to link towns and parishes to the campaign, to highlight the benefits of high-speed broadband, and to encourage households and businesses to take part in the survey.

So far 38 volunteers in a third of Cotswolds parishes have stepped up to become broadband champions.

Borders Broadband is managed by GFirst (Gloucestershire's Local Enterprise Partnership), Gloucestershire County Council, Herefordshire Council and Government agency, Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK).

"I would urge everybody to complete a survey questionnaire," said GFirst Chief Executive David Owen. "We need to prove that rural communities need and want high-speed broadband so we can persuade commercial companies to invest in the necessary infrastructure."

The Cotswolds Conservation Board, which looks after the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, is also supporting the campaign.

The Board's own survey of internet speeds throughout the Cotswolds AONB area shows that nearly half of households in the area have broadband speeds below or at 2Mbps - the Government's acceptable minimum level of service (see map).

"Access to fast broadband is of fundamental importance to the economy and cultural life of the Cotswolds," said the board's Planning Officer Malcolm Watt.

"Poor internet services are holding back rural businesses throughout the area. And high-speed broadband would reduce car use by encouraging people to work from home."

Borders Broadband was awarded £14.5 million for Gloucestershire and Herefordshire, making this one of the first parts of the UK to share £530 million Government cash for rural high-speed broadband.

Major private sector investment is vital to the project's success. Public funding is being used to attract a commercial telecoms supplier and persuade them there is significant demand for fast broadband in the county's rural areas.

Telecoms companies are involved in a complex tendering process to provide the new broadband infrastructure. A contract is expected to be awarded in late Spring 2012.

## **The survey**

You can complete the residents' survey online at [www.gfirst.co.uk/broadband](http://www.gfirst.co.uk/broadband) or you may get a printed questionnaire through your letterbox. Copies will also be available at local libraries, or via parish and town councillors.

Household questionnaires are also available from Gloucestershire Rural Community Council (GRCC) – contact Chris Cowcher on 01452 528491. Anyone wishing to volunteer as a broadband champion for their community can also contact GRCC.

There is also a separate survey for businesses (if you run a local business and live in Gloucestershire, please complete both residential and business surveys). The business survey is available online at <http://bit.ly/betterbroadband> For more details about Borders Broadband see [www.gfirst.co.uk/broadband](http://www.gfirst.co.uk/broadband)

## **CASE STUDY – Rain stops play in super-slow Southam (with pic)**

Local businessman Bernard Weekes keeps a wary eye on the weather when using the internet. When it rains his broadband speed plummets.

Mr Weekes, from the village of Southam near Cheltenham, said his internet provider promised speeds of 8Mbps, but his actual speeds are a fraction of that.

"There's obviously a problem somewhere down the line because when it rains, our download speed drops even more," he said. "When it rains it drops to around 0.2 Mbps."

Mr Weekes, aged 65, runs a small property business from home - but he finds it frustrating as he struggles to download files.

"I used to have a dial-up service and I would say that my broadband service is only slightly faster than that," he said. "It's abysmal."

Villagers have been in a long-running battle to improve broadband in Southam. Last year the village conducted its own survey of broadband speeds, which found the average is just 0.9 Mbps. The average speed nationally is 6.2Mbps.

"The service here is very poor, particularly compared to surrounding areas," said local campaign spokesman Steve Lennon.

"It affects people right across the spectrum, from the clutch of small businesses based in the village, to children trying to download information for their homework."

Fellow Southam resident, TV sports broadcaster Jill Douglas, depends on the internet to prepare for outside broadcasts.

"I work from home a lot, where I do preparation for covering live sports events, and I'm really frustrated by the poor broadband service," she said.

"I need to watch matches online during the week, but at home I just can't access the material. You can't use BBC i-Player in Southam, and if you want to download anything your computer takes hours and hours.

"Yet I can go into Starbucks in Cheltenham and get a much better broadband service. It's hugely frustrating."

## **FACTFILE 1 - What do broadband speeds mean?**

Broadband speed is the rate at which data is sent (uploaded) or received (downloaded) through your connection. It is measured in kilobits per second (Kbps) or megabits per second (Mbps).

The best way to understand all this is to look at what different speeds allow you to do on the Internet.

### **At 512Kbps you can:**

- load a typical web page in 1.6 secs
- download a 5-minute song in 1 min 30 secs
- stream\* low quality video

### **At 2Mbps you can:**

- load a web page in 0.4 secs
- download a song in 20 secs
- stream medium quality video

### **At 8Mbps you can:**

- load a web page virtually instantaneously
- download a song in 2.5 secs
- stream TV quality video

(Source: [www.broadband.co.uk](http://www.broadband.co.uk))

\*Streaming means your computer can play music or video while it downloads.

## **FACTFILE 2 - Why do we need fast broadband?**

### **Family & friends**

- Keeping in touch with family and friends via video links
- Sharing photos and music, playing on-line games and downloading your favourite films
- More and more TV programmes are becoming available online, but you need fast broadband to be able to watch them

### **Shopping & Savings**

- Almost everything is cheaper online. Save hundreds of pounds a year on insurance, holidays, gas, electricity and phone
- The best rates of interest for savings and loans are only available online
- Estate agents say that a lack of broadband cuts ten per cent off the value of your home

### **School & home**

- Schools and colleges increasingly want homework and coursework submitted online
- Reference books are being replaced by online multi-media resources for home study
- Schools increasingly communicate with students and parents via the internet

## **FACTFILE 3 – Benefits to local businesses**

- Huge savings can be made on phone bills by Using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) systems
- Video-conferencing is becoming common for business meetings, saving substantial travel costs
- Online training is becoming increasingly important, especially to rural businesses
- Fast broadband services mean staff can work from home, improving their work-life balance

- Increasingly businesses are turning to 'cloud computing', in which shared resources, software and data are accessed via the internet.
- Social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Linked-in are becoming a must for businesses to network and market themselves
- The local economy is suffering because of poor internet services. High-speed broadband will attract more businesses to the area, with knock-on benefits for suppliers
- Creative industries represent a rapidly growing sector, whose businesses need to move large audio and video files quickly. For them fast broadband is essential
- Tourism is a key industry for Gloucestershire. People increasingly expect their accommodation to offer speedy online booking and – during their stay - wireless internet

**ENDS**