



10th May 2007

Case Study

Switch on Shropshire

By targeting four exchanges for early enablement BT was able to help the Switch on Shropshire Partnership realise its vision of making broadband the norm for communities and hundreds of businesses across the county.

Background

Shropshire is one of England's largest counties. However with a population just over 280,000, and often considerable distances between places, the county risked being left behind in the broadband revolution which had taken the rest of the UK by storm.

With £4.8 million funding, Shropshire County Council, in partnership with BT, Business Link and the Rural Community Council of Shropshire, set about encouraging the private sector to invest in and roll out broadband infrastructure to all communities within the county.

This was designed to ensure that businesses located in Shropshire would no longer be at a digital disadvantage and that the region would become more attractive as an investment location to other UK businesses.

At the same time local communities could gain access to online learning and ICT via a number of 'broad-places' created in existing community halls and other voluntary facilities.

The Challenge - stimulating demand for the power of broadband

In an area where many people were unaware of what broadband was and why it was better than traditional dial-up, the first phase of the Switch on Shropshire (SoS) partnership had to focus on raising awareness of the benefits of broadband.

This involved, among other things, arranging seminars for businesses, attending any relevant exhibitions, articles in the local paper, as well as a radio campaign.

In addition, BT ran an exchange enablement campaign which would speed up the rate of broadband rollout to communities. Specifically four exchanges across the region were targeted for early enablement.

At the same time SoS and BT were able to trial various support packages which could then be developed and enhanced to meet specific needs. And alternative broadband technologies were made available to rural businesses and communities to stimulate further a demand for the wider supply, promotion and adoption of sustainable broadband solutions during the second phase of the campaign.

The Solution – the right technologies at the right time

Over a two-phase, three-year period, Shropshire County Council (SCC) in partnership with BT and Business Link provided ICT advice and support to several communities and hundreds of businesses across Shropshire.

Specifically SCC was tasked with creating 35 'broad-places' in preferred locations such as village halls, community centres and local pubs which would provide eligible rural communities with ready broadband access and ICT facilities from which to shop online, pursue hobbies, chat, etc.

Obtaining the buy-in and support of local communities was vital. Numerous local liaison officers and other volunteers were nominated and elected from within the communities to take ownership of the management of the broad-places and any activities undertaken within these premises.

Each broad-place was set up with the specific needs of the respective communities in mind. Some would offer formal learning classes in partnership with local colleges or training organisations, some run volunteer-led Drop-In sessions while others would promote online shopping, cattle registration schemes for Defra, or Learndirect courses.

Businesses in eligible areas on the other hand were provided with ICT advice and support packages developed in partnership with BT. These packages would include grant aid enabling businesses to match-fund the purchase of broadband equipment, connections and training.

Similarly BT worked with SoS to help businesses develop intelligent products and channels that would allow them to operate more effectively in a more competitive 21st century environment. Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) were also offered free advice and given up to 50% funding to become broadband ready.

The Results – reaping the rewards

Access to broadband has transformed life and work within the county of Shropshire.

The decision by the regional development agency, Advantage West Midlands, to extend coverage to the rural areas through the Rural Broadband Access Project meant the availability issue could be addressed. Thanks to the BT digital exchange rollout programme, 98% of Shropshire residents now have access to broadband.

As a result, broadband take up has increased dramatically from 1% in 2003 (compared to 5% in the UK overall) to 34.15% in December 2006 (compared to 30.9% in the UK overall).

Similarly, the old perception of broadband having no real added-value has changed to one where broadband is widely recognised as helping to narrow the economic gap between communities and SMEs throughout the county.

Over a three year period, 7% of all eligible SMEs in Shropshire received SoS business advice, 250 SMEs received a subsidised broadband connectivity grant, 120 received grant aid for hardware, software and training and a further 60 received funding for wanting to engage in eBusiness.

The use of grants to individual businesses has also accelerated their move to online trading, establishing links to back office and stock control systems.

Shropshire now has 35 locations owned by communities where people can access ICT facilities and make use of broadband in an environment that is mediated by friends and colleagues. In 2006, 15% of the population used one of the broad-places – translating into roughly 25,000 visits out of an eligible population of 173,000. By January 2007, there were over 420 active volunteers across the broad-place network.

In recognition of its contribution to improving the delivery of rural services SCC was awarded the coveted Beacon status.

Ends.