

Connected comment

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SELLING bras on the worldwide web has proved a success for Sally, a Yorkshire farmer's wife, and her nicely-named business amplebosom.com. But it's got so much better since she got broadband. The internet access is 10 times faster than it was before and it takes her moments, rather than hours, to download designs sent to her.

Sally is lucky among rural businesses, most of which are finding that getting broadband and the competitive advantages it brings – such as the ability to use the phone and net at the same time with just one line – is nigh on impossible. The scale of the problem rather takes the shine off Tony Blair's grand vision of Broadband Britain and the Government's boast this week that 2m people have the service already.

It is true that two-thirds of the English population can now use broadband if they want it, but the comparison between urban and rural areas is startling. According to the Countryside Agency, in urban areas 95pc of the population can now access affordable broadband. Contrast that with 26pc in market towns, 7pc in villages and 1pc in remote rural areas.

Welcome to the real digital divide. It crosses all boundaries of social class and you probably aren't aware of it unless you live out of town, where the economy has been hit so hard of late that another competitive disadvantage risks putting thousands out of business.

For once, it seems, BT is not entirely to blame. The former phone monopoly, which still has a stranglehold on the copper wires that run from its exchanges to the nation's homes, appears to be helping to hit Tony's targets in return for a more benign regulatory environment. To a certain extent, the deal is working.

BT's registration scheme encourages folks in rural areas to drum up the 300 or more people needed for each local exchange to make the roll-out of the service economically viable. You can start your own campaign on the internet at bt.com.

There is long way to go however; at present, less than a quarter of BT's 5,500 exchanges are enabled to carry broadband. Still, the company is entitled to reap a return and it makes perfect sense to ensure the demand is there before splurging shareholders' money.

The bigger problem begins if you live where there are not enough households and businesses to meet the 300 threshold. Even if there are, if you live more than three miles from the exchange you are excluded because the signal deteriorates too much before it reaches you. This is where the Government could start doing more to help.

A simple way would be a more dynamic use of the £1 billion being spent on a public broadband network connecting every school, library, hospital and so on by 2005. Just about every village, however small, has a school.

Experts say the building could easily serve as a local exchange with private telecoms operators "piggybacking" on the network to provide access for local people.

It's already happening in some areas but the bureaucratic suits in many councils are questioning whether EC laws allow them to use public sector money to "subsidise" the private sector. Government recently paid lip service to this issue but it needs to give firmer guidance about the legality of such a move.

Meanwhile, enterprising folk in some parts of the country are using other technologies to tackle the problem. One community in the tiny hamlet of East Meon in Hampshire adopted the DIY approach. Run by

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Michael Blakstad, the former editor of the *Tomorrow's World* programme, it has decided that if BT, NTL and Telewest won't help, it will build its own local broadband radio network, carrying data at higher speeds.

The first thing you need for this inexpensive operation, says Mr Blakstad, is a satellite dish – which will connect to a satellite service, offered in this case by a company called Aramiska.

You then need the relevant router and computer software, a small wireless antenna to send the signal to and from the home or office, and an even smaller antenna on the outside of the building where the computer is.

You don't need 300 people, you don't need BT, you don't even need Tony Blair's help. You need a few local people with a bit of gumption and someone who knows one end of a screwdriver from another. It's an utterly fantastic and enterprising idea. A bit like selling bras on the internet.

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