



MerseyBroadband

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MerseyBroadband

PROMOTING ACCESS, PROJECTING EXCELLENCE

Report 2004/06

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The UK has the most extensive broadband infrastructure of the G7 nations.

 **MerseyBroadband** was set up to take advantage of this by helping businesses improve productivity and helping communities tackle issues such as exclusion and skills.

The project was a collaborative partnership between IT User Group, Merit, Liverpool Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Liverpool John Moores University's International Centre for Digital Content (ICDC). It was funded by the Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA) and ERDF Objective One with support from the Greater Merseyside Digital Development Agency, (GMDDA).

Two strands of the project, Teleworking & Enabling SMEs, focused on using broadband technology to improve business efficiency and over 700 companies took part in subsidised broadband pilots. Kensington Vision provided the residents of Kensington, an inner city area of Liverpool, with their own digital TV channel. MerseyBroadband also offered a Community Chest fund of £500,000, awarding grants of between £20,000 and £150,000 for innovative community and business projects using broadband technology.

The community of Kensington enjoyed a unique opportunity to create and access up to date information via broadband. All of the content was produced by local people, who received full training and support, making the initiative both independent and sustainable. Run by ICDC and BT Media and Broadcast, this was the first community initiative of its kind in the country to adopt BT Media and Broadcast technology for hosting and delivery of video content created by a community.

By working directly with the Kensington community, MerseyBroadband discovered successful approaches to bridging the digital divide by creating a reason and a desire to use the technology, it has demonstrated how to improve awareness of broadband's potential and now this can be rolled out across other communities. Kensington Vision is now being approached by community groups looking to develop similar initiatives in their own areas and the project is becoming a sustainable business.



Initially the programmes and information were delivered over a broadband network to a pilot of 150 households, businesses and organisations through interactive digital television set top boxes and

to the whole community via the website, www.kensingtonvision.org For Kensington residents with a set top box, pressing channel 909 was the equivalent of typing in a URL but through the familiar technology of the TV remote control.

People who have no computing skills have taken part, their feedback was invaluable in evaluating the project. Training members of the community in filming and editing ensured that they have as many skills as possible to make the project a success and is helping people develop new careers and interests.





In 2004 dial-up internet use was common in Greater Merseyside's SMEs - small and medium sized businesses.

Awareness of the benefits of broadband was lacking. A key part of MerseyBroadband's role was to assist them to understand and use its business potential.

The broadband demonstration centre located in Liverpool city centre promoted business use of the technology, showcasing relevant broadband applications and services. It provided a variety of technologies such as offsite data storage, teleworking and Application

Service Provision (ASP), enabling small businesses to rent normally expensive software without large financial outlays.

The centre also offered a business assistance drop-in service with knowledgeable staff on hand providing free one-to-one advice and technical guidance. MerseyBroadband also hosted regular seminars and demonstrations of specific business related aspects of broadband technology and subsidised pilots aimed at business.



ToBe.co.uk

Wirral based uniform and corporate wear suppliers ToBe.co.uk have transformed their business by using Cybertill.

Proprietors Neil and Diane Moores initially ran the whole of their operation from home, but now sell uniforms, school wear, staff wear, and scout & guide clothing from retail premises.

Unlike other electronic point of sale systems, Cybertill is an Application Service Provider (ASP) that allows a business to use remote software via a broadband connection. It provides a range of services such as 'real time' stock control across a number of sites without using expensive servers.

One of the key advantages of this system for ToBe was its support with stock control linked to their retail website. Diane said:

“With the Cybertill system, we don't have to manually count out stock anymore. We know exactly what we have and when an order comes in, we don't have to go in the stock room and look for it, a much more efficient way of working.”

We are now raising most of our purchase orders through the system and it will prompt us when stocks are low.

We are hoping to encourage more customers to order online and by adding tobe@work, tobeuniform and tobeactive to the website, we hope to achieve similar growth in business-to-business sales.”

Prescott Architectural Ironmongers

Prescott Architectural Ironmongers is a well established firm, specialising in commercial, domestic and designer door furniture.



The company carried out their business using traditional paper based methods. The joint managing director Colin Prescott admits that he was doubtful the internet would be beneficial to his business.

He says using a dial-up connection for web access was frustrating:

“It's really important for us to see pictures of products before we order them to make sure that we get what we need. But the images took so long to view.”



When an increasing number of their suppliers and customers took up broadband, the company was under pressure to keep up. He says:

“We can now get orders out the same day, we used to fax architectural drawings now they are emailed which offers much better quality. I’m sure this increased responsiveness is winning us business we wouldn’t previously have got.”

Colin continued:

“When a customer ordered a specialist part I found it on the internet in seven minutes, dial-up would have been too slow and I’d have spent half a day going through catalogues and ringing around.”

Impressed by this, the company went on to invest in a wireless network so that staff can be connected wherever they are in the premises.

“The accounts team now send invoices by email. In a matter of months a high speed connection has made a huge difference to the way we work. I really can’t imagine how we got on without broadband and I wonder how much more successful we’d have been if we’d got it years ago.”

Liverpool Community Transport

Liverpool Community Transport has generated new business from having its own bespoke website developed using EntryNet, provided free for a year by MerseyBroadband.

Established in 1972 the company offers cost effective transport provision, catering for hundreds of statutory, voluntary and community organisations providing adapted transport for special needs groups. Thomas Crofton of Liverpool Community Transport says:

“In the past we promoted the business through leaflets, flyers and relied on word of mouth. The website has been very beneficial, it’s very easy to update, unlike leaflets and it has brought the company more business as new clients have found us through searching the web.

We are now taking online bookings and getting feedback through the website. We are really pleased with it, it’s been easy to use and has been great for promoting the business, it’s really put us out there.”

MerseyBroadband promoted teleworking to businesses.

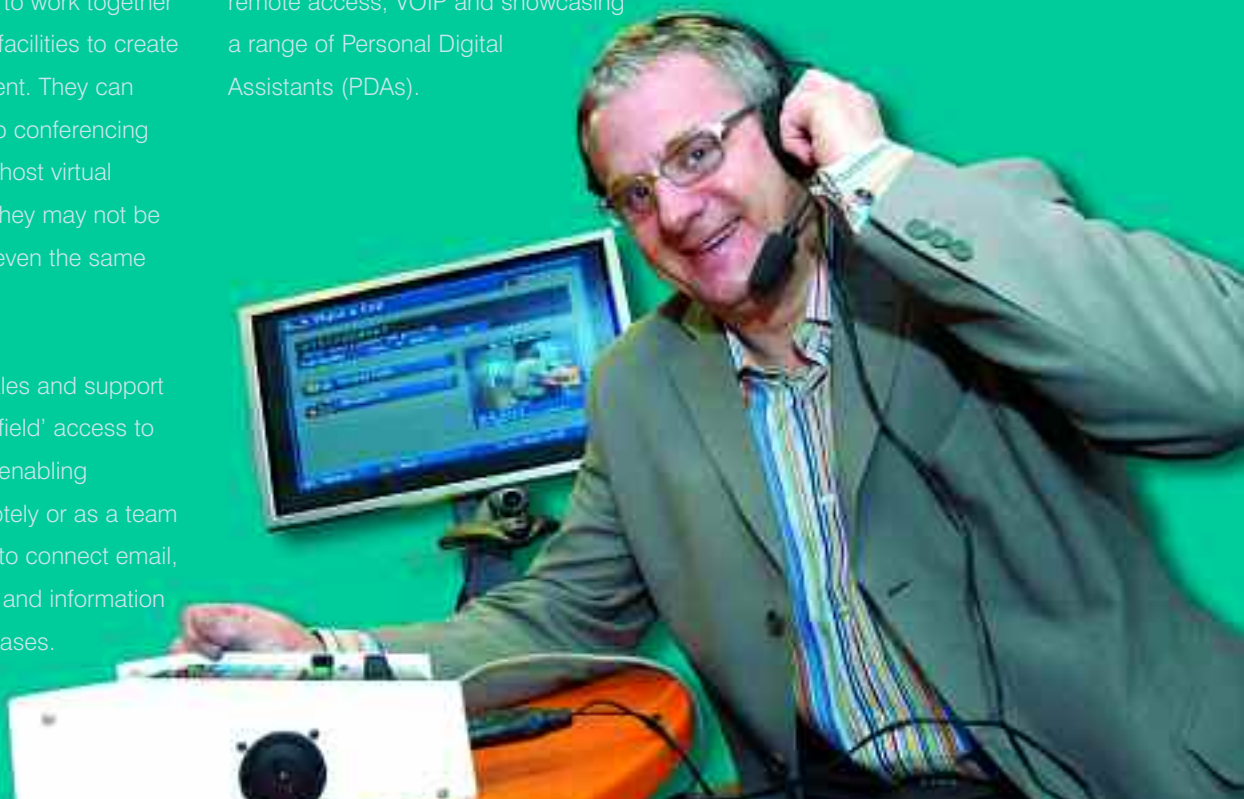


Teleworking is about new ways of working. It offers businesses flexibility in how their staff work together and communicate. There are several options; home working, connecting to the workplace via a home office Virtual Private Network (VPN) solution, virtual team working and mobile working.

'Virtual team working' is designed to help staff who are away from the office or based in satellite offices to work together using an array of online facilities to create a virtual office environment. They can share files and use video conferencing and teleconferencing to host virtual meetings, even though they may not be in the same building or even the same country.

Mobile working offers sales and support staff who are 'out in the field' access to the office. It can involve enabling employees to work remotely or as a team based over a wide area to connect email, diaries, intranet, internet and information such as customer databases.

A range of teleworking technology including Blackberrys, Avaya IP Small Office / Home office and a video conferencing facility were available in the demonstration centre. This was supported by a range of pilots and seminars throughout the two years of the programme highlighting teleworking technology such as vehicle and order tracking systems, video conferencing, remote access, VOIP and showcasing a range of Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs).





Palace Marketing

By using broadband, Palace Marketing, an emerging company, has been able to retain a key member of staff. It's also been instrumental in helping the business to grow, bringing in customers and enabling them to work with suppliers worldwide.

Managing Director Chris Randles founded Palace Marketing in October 2002, recruiting Andrew Moore as Technical Director. The company provides web services and downloadable ringtones for mobile phones.

Growing turnover meant growing travel for Andrew as he spent weekends in his home town, Loughborough, a weekly four hour commute. He said:

"I was tied into working from the office but I found that broadband and some changes in our work practices allowed me to do almost all my work at home and just go up to Liverpool every few weeks for meetings. Now I can access all the files in the office without commuting and have instant communication with the people I work with all over the world. Being able to work from home definitely makes me more productive and happier."

Remote working has since been adopted by other staff; this has saved £600 per month rent in the additional office space.

Broadband has also saved money by allowing internet phone calls.

Broadband has also been crucial to Palace's rapid business growth. Many of the company's ringtone producers work from home studios, uploading large files to the Palace servers. One of these is located in Dallas.

"I can access this 24/7 and work on it as easily as with our network in Liverpool,"

Andrew observes:

"The speed of broadband means we can do in minutes what years ago would have taken hours."

Growing broadband take-up in society also increases Palace's customer base for ringtones - it has already received orders from over 50 countries. Chris Randles is convinced that broadband has played a crucial role in the company's growth and success.

"It has revolutionised the way we do things.

We can react instantly to our clients' queries and demands in a way that wouldn't otherwise be possible. This flexibility and the fact that we can now communicate easily and cheaply means that broadband is helping us to win contracts with new clients from all over the world. Without broadband we simply wouldn't exist."

Barristers

Four Barristers' Chambers in Liverpool city centre are appreciating the benefits that video conferencing can bring to their businesses. The system has been an instant success for Oriel, Exchange, Atlantic and Chavasse Chambers.



The technology allows them to share electronic content such as PowerPoint presentations, video and Word documents and printed material such as old case files within a conferencing session. Each conference session can also be recorded digitally onto a computer and played back for future review.

The system has transformed their businesses. Michael Knibb, Exchange Chamber's IT Manager said:

"We used to have barristers travelling all over the country for hearings and conferences with clients. With the help of the video conference facility one of our barristers saved a full day of travel to and from Durham and in that time managed a hearing at Liverpool Crown Court in the morning and paperwork in the afternoon."

Exchange Chambers also have an office in Manchester and have been so impressed with video conferencing that they have also installed the system in their office there and are now rolling it out to all desktop computers in both chambers.

Allan Weston, Atlantic Chambers' Head of Support Services, said:

"Our investment in technology - and the extra efficiency and time savings it provides - is strengthening our competitive edge and so bringing more work into the North West."

The Chambers have been hosting their own informal demonstrations of the system and have added to their business by charging external users for the service. Allan calculates that use of the equipment in just one case saved between £5-10,000 from the public purse.

A link to the London-based Bar Council also enables all the Liverpool barristers to hear and participate in its open forums.

Allan believes that this use of videoconferencing makes

"the professional skills and knowledge of our barristers even better. We also get an earlier understanding of developments that might affect our business - and therefore a more level playing field when we compete against chambers from the south."

Jonathan Ford & Co

Chartered accountants Jonathan Ford & Co have been using an internet document management system and have proved how small firms can benefit from using broadband technology.



Jonathan Ford, comments:

"It allows our clients and staff 24-hour access to their accounts and financial details in addition to being able to submit their tax returns online. The ability to transfer and receive information from clients and partners anywhere in the world has also allowed the firm to outsource some routine work to people who work from home."

"Before we started this system, all accounts were archived and stored on paper. Searching out the documents and posting them could take a long time. Now we no longer need to spend time printing, binding and packing."

"It has also cut down the number of requests to resend documents, which saves even more time."

Previously the company had to store and archive 30-40 boxes of papers each year. Dispensing with this has created annual savings of an estimated £6000 in staff time, storage and retrieval costs.

It has improved client confidentiality and peace of mind. Documents access now requires a password. And multiple and frequently updated back-ups mean that even if computers crash or the offices are destroyed the information is safe.

Jonathan continued:

"Having electronic records means we can quickly and easily fill out and return tax forms for clients. We're now completing VAT returns this way. This saves them a great deal of time and effort and keeps our fees competitive."





The Community Chest was designed to assist a wide range of organisations, reflected by the broad nature of the projects that successfully gained funding.

Grants were awarded after the bids were considered by a panel of IT specialists from across the region.

The total of £500,000 was allocated within a year with all the projects providing match funding to ensure that the funding was as effective as possible.

The criteria required proposals to be new and innovative. The twelve successful bids covered a wide spectrum from health information to community TV to creation of an online platform for selling computer games software.

A grant of £30,000 helped **Ariel Trust** develop e-learning resources for use by teachers across Merseyside. Paul Ainsworth, Director of the Trust said:



“MerseyBroadband’s investment in the ‘Digital Inclusion’ project allowed us to purchase additional laptops giving us a suite of 14.

These are equipped with 3G cards to enable them to connect to the

internet and access Ariel’s IT network remotely.”

The laptops are being used across Merseyside in schools, youth centres and venues where there is currently no broadband access. By taking this technology into the most deprived and disadvantaged communities, wireless broadband technology will reach those who are not otherwise aware of its potential. The audio material collected during the Digital Inclusion project will be professionally edited to produce a teaching resource.

Funding of £55,000 has enabled residents of five tower blocks in South Liverpool to host community-driven internet TV from a studio near their homes. **Tenantspin** is an internet TV channel run by tenants of Arena Housing properties in Sefton Park.

The grant builds on this successful web casting project, supported by FACT (The Foundation for Art and Creative Technology) and established four years ago. Merseybroadband’s support provided an internet TV studio, next to the flats.

Training, provided by FACT, includes studio management, camera work, sound and mixing, presentation and editing. The content is solely produced by residents, the majority of whom are over 50 and who are now proficient programme producers, researchers and presenters. ‘Tenantspin’ and FACT now aim to establish the satellite as a Centre of Excellence, offering training to other UK community groups.

Several new and emerging businesses were supported by Community Chest funds. Journalist Tom Dowling used his award of £54,000 to set up a new online magazine **All Together Now!** The site provides news and information for an estimated 500,000 disabled people, carers and people who are aged over 65 across the region.

As a wheelchair user Tom spotted a gap in the market and recent research has found that disabled people have a greater need for the benefits of the internet than able bodied people.



Tom explained:

“We’ve made the magazine as accessible to as many people as possible including those with various sensory impairments. Our online magazine gives community groups an instant way of spreading their news to a much wider market and of course providing businesses and organisations with a terrific opportunity to get their messages across.”

Funding of £63,000 is helping breast cancer patients across the region test a new and innovative way to access information about their treatment.

MiHealth Ltd, a new company created from the research and development work at ICDC will use technology to meet the information needs of cancer patients and their friends and family. The prototype system, developed in Liverpool, is currently being piloted as part of a study at the Linda McCartney Centre at Royal Liverpool University Hospital.

It examines the potential benefits of delivering information via the web and hand-held computers and compares them to more traditional approaches such as patient information leaflets. It includes appointment and treatment diaries, important contacts and a mood journal to record their mental and physical changes.

Project Manager, Jane Wood said:

“The system has the potential to help the 17.5 million patients with chronic and long term medical conditions by delivering timely, high quality information that gives them power and choice over their treatment to improve the quality of their lives. In addition, the system has great potential to educate healthcare professionals in understanding the patient’s experience.”

Development would see use of the system on a much wider scale across the region providing simultaneous access to multiple NHS trust centres.

£45,000 is helping Jonathan Wetherall of Toxteth based games creation company, **Onteca** develop a new online game development platform.

He explained how he developed the concept:

“During the last few years Onteca has worked with a variety of community organisations training adults and children in skills necessary to produce content for the computer games industry. We have recognised the ability of people outside of the ‘formal’ games industry to create content which can be used within commercial games.”

MerseyBroadband funding is to help Onteca create an online platform for the collaborative creation of computer game, video and entertainment content which can be sold directly to the consumer via the internet. Individual users will be able to submit work. Onteca’s platform means their work can be accepted and authenticated and they will be paid.

Jon continued:

“We are addressing an important issue within the next generation of online content - how can freelancers and micro-SMEs collaborate to create content which surpasses that of large internal teams in corporations. Broadband access enables these diverse developers to collaborate to create flexible teams and share information.”

It will create a dynamic cluster of SMEs and freelancers from disabled and other minority groups.

“It will be a new platform for a group of associated freelance artists to sell their work. This project will enhance disabled people’s access to the information society. We will create a sustainable content development platform and will look to create at least three jobs.”

Waterloo, to the north of the city, is set to be the centre of the film and media industry in Merseyside. £62,600 of funding is helping local businessman, Paul Morrissey, create an incubator to support SMEs working in this sector.

Paul, the driving force behind the cluster, has relocated his two successful businesses, **Tubedale Films** and **X-SP** from London to form the backbone of the cluster, providing a fully enabled workspace for small firms.



He explained:

“Film makers and media creators are looking for a hub to provide a regional ‘centre of excellence’ outside London. I’ve seen how business incubators have worked in other fields. I’m passionate to replicate it in my home town.”

The funding from MerseyBroadband has enabled him to put together the hardware and software to enable cluster companies to render and distribute their content to the new internet distribution space.

Ten film and media companies are now working out of the premises on Crosby Road South, attracted by the range of resources available to enable their businesses to become fully self-sufficient.

Paul says:

“I believe that for the film and media sector to be successful it needs to be economically viable and sustainable. A clustered environment where disparate skills can work together, combined with opportunity for businesses to sell through a new distribution channel, provides this opportunity. It also gives industry leverage for this group of companies that they would not have individually. Our next step is to use the cluster to encourage international companies to work in this region.”

Marketing of the project was split into initial brand awareness, the benefits of broadband for business then recruitment to pilots as the programme progressed.

Throughout the project, broadband benefits to the Merseyside economy and take-up on Merseyside was analysed. Marketing around brand awareness used a Merseyside-wide campaign of billboards backed by ads on taxis. MerseyBroadband’s exhibition stand visited business fairs across Merseyside and promoted the programme.

Marketing in the second year focused on promoting the demonstration centre, through adverts on car park barriers, underground stations in the business district and a year’s lease on a bus stop poster site outside the demonstration centre itself. This was backed by a regular programme of seminars supported by press ads and editorial. Throughout the project, the website was constantly developed and updated, providing a resource for those taking part in the project and attracting new participants.





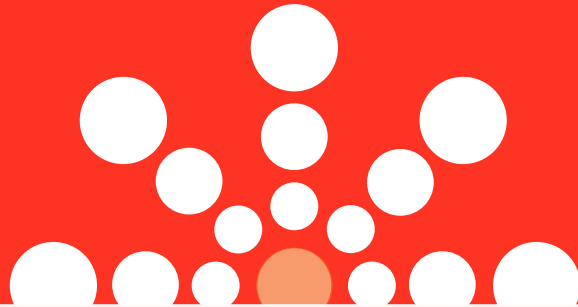
Broadband has now become a mainstream service for businesses

In the 21st century businesses in all sectors need to invest in technology in order to compete and survive. MerseyBroadband has successfully conveyed this message to companies throughout the region. Over 700 businesses are now using technology that has improved their business performance. In many cases, through technology they might not have considered relevant to their work. Accessing it through the support of the project with subsidised costs has enabled them to see the benefits without the risk of financial commitment.

At the beginning of the project in September 2004 broadband take-up on Merseyside was 9.5%. By January 2006 it had risen to 20.9%. Broadband has now become a mainstream service for businesses and the healthy UK market has resulted in competitive pricing and wide choice for both consumers and business with ever increasing bandwidth and the proliferation of wireless networks increasing its availability and use across all sectors.

Following on from the success of MerseyBroadband both the Greater Merseyside Digital Development Agency (GMDDA) and MERIT will be continuing to provide assistance and support for businesses. MERIT, a key partner in delivering MerseyBroadband, is continuing with training, seminars and events programmes aimed at all IT users across all sectors.

GMDDA is always looking at developing strategic improvements in the region. It is made up of representatives of the public, private, community and voluntary sectors. Their role is to help identify ICT priorities for the region, seek projects to address them and to work to secure the resources to do so. MerseyBroadband came from GMDDA priorities to improve the broadband infrastructure of the region.



The six local authorities in Greater Merseyside are now working in partnership with the private and community sectors to take part in the Government's Digital Challenge, a £7m competition for innovative use of ICT.

The GMDDA has been working with Liverpool Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Government Office North West to establish an ICT investment fund. This £1m fund will help local companies to invest in their business and maximise the potential of technology. The fund will support anything from innovations in business systems to new infrastructure improvements. Awards will be between £10,000 and £25,000.

For more information call the Chamber on 0151 227 1234.

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The future