



Broadband can't get it, won't get it?

It's been a long time coming but BT's ADSL preregistration scheme, designed to sniff out areas where demand for broadband services is running high, finally seems to be bearing fruit. Guy Dixon reports

Here at Broadband Advisor we've spent the past six months trying to persuade you that moving up to a high-speed, always-on broadband internet connection is probably the single most rewarding thing you can currently do to enhance your computing experience.

But, as many readers have rightly pointed out, what use is such advice if you're one of the UK's 33 percent who can't get conventional cable or ADSL access? If you're one of Britain's unlucky one in three, this feature is for you. If, on the other hand, you've got a trigger level set for your area, why not do as *PC Advisor* reader Stephen Whitfield-Almond has done and wage a successful campaign to bring broadband to your area? (see *Nailsworth's battle for broadband* on page 130.)

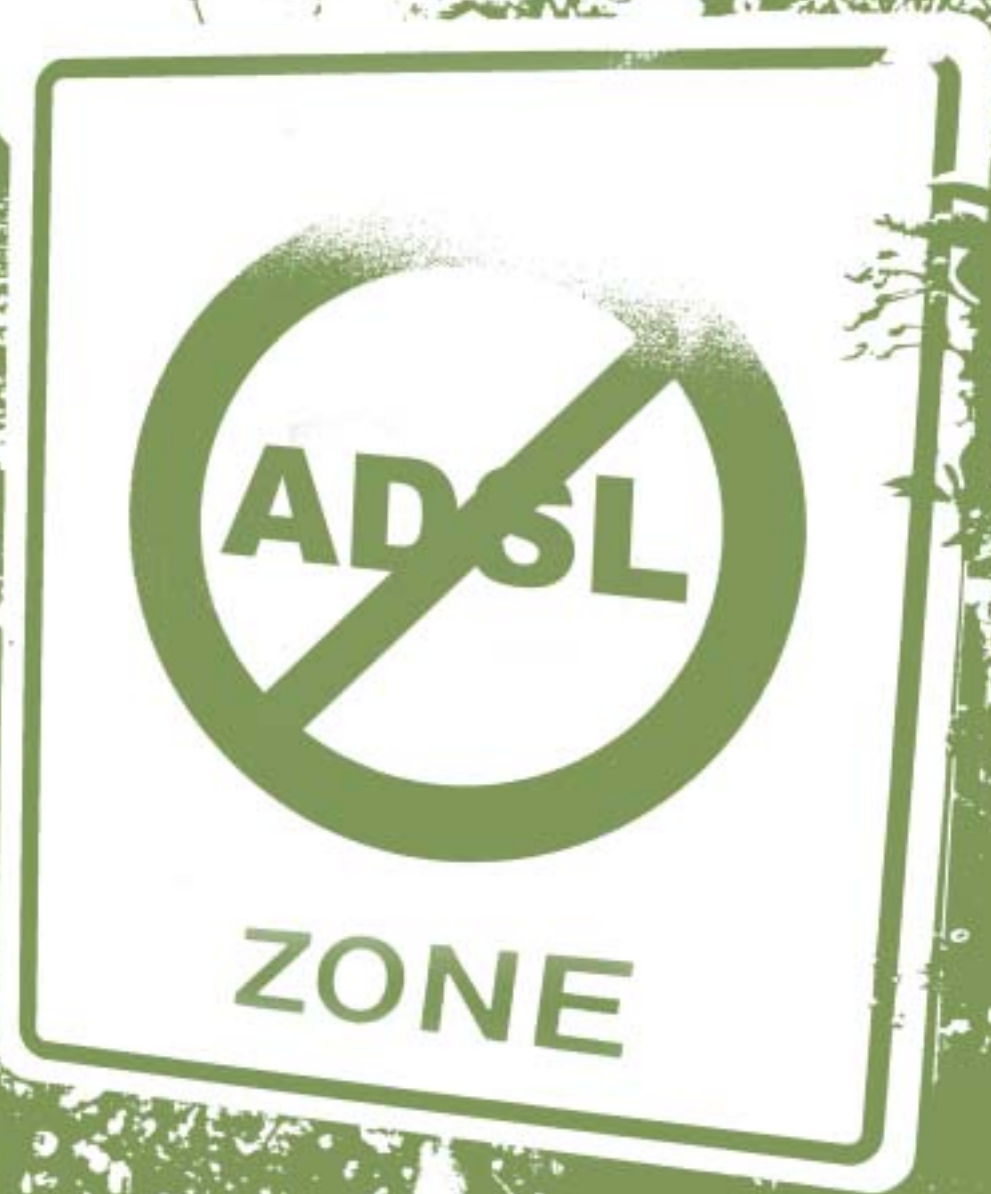
In the past BT has, with considerable justification, been accused of 'trialware' – launching pilot schemes that demonstrate

alternative methods of providing broadband as a means of keeping government, pressure groups and the media off its back. Then, while nobody's looking, the pilot scheme usually finds itself swept swiftly under the carpet.

Another one bites the dust

Remember Mesh radio technology? In a test project last summer, BT hooked up 100 households in Pontypridd, South Wales, installing a small radio antenna in each one. Signals were then transmitted to neighbouring users to form a network, otherwise known as a mesh.

It may sound clever, but needless to say the idea bit the dust in December. In Scotland, where, owing to the population density broadband availability is exceptionally low, BT has even touted a means of accessing broadband via airships. A word of



advice: if you live north of the border, we wouldn't recommend holding your breath for this one.

However, despite its somewhat sketchy commitment to a rollout beyond the existing 67 percent of the ADSL-enabled population, BT finally appears to be pulling its cumbersome broadband finger out. This summer sees joy for hundreds of thousands of households who have frustratingly been on the edge of ADSL areas, but just too far from the exchange to get a broadband service.

June will witness the extension of ADSL's reach to a further 600,000 homes – to households that are between 5.5km and 6km from their local exchanges.

Meanwhile, BT Wholesale's preregistration program is quietly building momentum both in terms of awareness and economic viability. The scheme, combined with recently announced methods of making exchange upgrades cheaper, primarily by reducing the cost of connection to the core BT network, means hundreds of new exchanges are gaining viability status. Through the preregistration scheme BT has cleverly galvanised local armies of unpaid volunteers, evangelising broadband to an often sceptical public.

Trigger happy

For the uninitiated, the preregistration campaign is part of BT Wholesale's strategy to sniff out pockets of demand for broadband in areas without ADSL-enabled telephone exchanges.

In remote locations upgrades are risky as BT can't be sure it will get sufficient signups to generate the profitable returns its shareholders require. So last year a preregistration scheme was set up to establish areas where demand is highest and thereby minimise risk.

When sufficient households have indicated their interest in getting an ADSL connection, a so-called 'trigger level' is reached and BT can upgrade the local exchange safe in the knowledge it won't be making a loss. The actual trigger level varies from exchange to exchange, because of the differing costs of upgrading. The number of required registrations vary between 200 and 500.

When the trigger level is reached BT informs the ISPs, which then have six weeks to get in touch with people who have registered. Three quarters of those who have registered need to be converted into formal orders before BT will enable the exchange. To find out if a trigger level has been set for your area



Nailsworth's battle for broadband

Professional photographer and *PC Advisor* reader, Stephen Whitfield-Almond helped lead a successful campaign that brought broadband to rural Nailsworth, deep in the heart of the English Cotswolds. Battling against the broadband odds, sleepy Nailsworth smashed through the required trigger level back in March and is eagerly awaiting the upgrade to its exchange on 25 June.

A trigger level of 350 was set for Nailsworth at the end of January. But with local evangelising limited to the occasional email campaign, broadband enthusiasts entertained little hope of getting ADSL this side of Christmas.

Make things happen

So began the Battle 4 Nailsworth campaign. Stephen teamed up with local entrepreneur Simeon Jones, whose plan for a July launch of a computer games centre depends on the arrival of broadband in downtown Nailsworth. Having looked at costly satellite alternatives, they concluded a successful campaign to hit the required trigger level would be the most cost-effective way of bringing broadband to the area.

The pair's first move was to set up the catchily titled website www.broadband4nailsworth.org to provide a focus for anyone that was interested in registering for broadband. The site had links to the BT preregistration page at www.bt.com/broadband in addition to FAQs for anyone uncertain about the advantages of broadband.

A core of four people were drafted in to run the campaign and regular meetings at Nailsworth's local hostelry brought in a further 20 evangelists. They now had sufficient numbers to set the broadband wheels in motion.

Leaflets were printed and for £20 the local newsagent stuffed every evening paper with one. Meanwhile, the campaign group set about the local press itself. The *Stroud News and Journal* duly ran an article about the campaign, which in turn raised further awareness.

The group then approached the largest local estate agent to quote, again in the *Stroud News and Journal*, that there was a housing price differential between broadband and non-broadband areas. Nailsworth serves London, Bristol and Swindon as a commuter area, so this tactic certainly stirred the masses. And even if people did not have a PC, they could now see it would be worth registering.

Stephen and Simeon decided to do the legwork involved in using the BT preregistration scheme. Setting up a stall at the local Saturday market, they encouraged people to sign a form complete with telephone number and address. Simeon then recorded their interest in broadband on their behalf, contacting BT in the meantime to explain why many local registrations were coming from the same IP address.

On 30 March, exactly two months after the start of campaign and a total cost of £250, Nailsworth hit its required trigger level.



Nailsworth's lessons learned: six of the best

- 1. Money matters** Locals were initially suspicious of the campaign group, wary of it having a money-making agenda. Convincing the local community that they weren't making any kind of commission presented a considerable challenge.
- 2. Pure interest** People had to be shown that registering did not mean that they had to have broadband and that they weren't signing any kind of contract by joining the scheme. It had to be hammered home that indicating their interest meant just that.
- 3. Youth of today** The campaign group found it had greatest success when aiming its message at younger people, primarily gamers, and businesses with local interests that had most to gain from getting broadband. "The sound of a constantly whining child will push most parents to sign up," explains *PC Advisor* reader Stephen Whitfield-Almond.
- 4. Skills set** A central committee to co-ordinate everything is essential. Canvassing local businesses produced a small amount of funding and a lot of expertise free of charge. The Nailsworth campaigners included a management consultant, three hi-tech company directors, a graphic designer and a telecoms specialist. Do a bit of digging, and the depth of local skills is surprising.
- 5. Alert and aware** There was an initial burst of preregistrations but this soon dropped off. This is when the publicity campaign needs to kick into action. It's essential to keep awareness levels as high as possible. Check with the county council to see if notices displaying the web address can be placed by the roadside or at crossroads or if people will put one up in their gardens.
- 6. Chain mail** Viral marketing works well. Everyone that was contacted was asked to pass on the introductory email to anyone in the area that they knew.

If all exchanges hit their triggers and are subsequently enabled, coverage will encompass some 90 percent of Britain's households

go to www.bt.com/broadband and click on Level of demand.

Those who dismiss the preregistration scheme as a typical BT smokescreen designed to excuse a mass rollout of ADSL to rural areas should consider the following. Firstly, BT has publicly committed itself to providing ADSL to 80 percent of the population within two years – so it'll look pretty silly if it

doesn't achieve it. Meanwhile, a further 400 triggers have been set over the summer months. That means in total around 1,500 exchanges will have had triggers set by the end of August.

So far, well in excess of 300 of these have already hit their predetermined trigger levels. If all exchanges hit their triggers and are subsequently enabled, coverage will encompass some 90 percent of Britain's households.

Give broadband a chance

The actual numbers that local campaign groups have to influence in many cases isn't that high – approximately half the triggers are set at between 300 and 400 registrations, while many are in the 200 region and could fall as low as 170.

BT, meanwhile, has set up a website to help local campaigners get their exchanges ADSL enabled. Its team will provide the groups with leaflets tailored to local areas, encouraging people to show their interest in receiving broadband by signing up with an ISP. These registrations will then count towards BT's trigger figures for upgrading exchanges.

The site can be accessed by visiting www.bt.com/broadband and clicking on the Broadband campaigns or Where I live links. These pages provide advice on starting a campaign, a list of areas currently carrying out campaigns and links to their websites, plus firsthand quotes and experiences of other campaigners and an order form for leaflets and posters.

The BT Wholesale support team has also set up email contacts and a free telephone helpline to offer advice and support. The giant telco is already working with 240 local groups to help them campaign for broadband and so far 53 of those groups have hit their trigger levels.

To get tips on how to run a successful campaign, see *Nailsworth's lessons learned: six of the best* on page 130.

Poor man's broadband: the bad news

Unfortunately, if you reside in an area that hasn't got any kind of trigger level – in other words one of the unlucky one in 10 – it's not worth getting your long-term broadband hopes up too high. Other than moving home the only affordable alternatives are a recently launched 'Midband' product from BT based on ISDN and

costly, or severely hampered, satellite services. While BT's Midband service runs at speeds up to 128Kbps (kilobits per second), it's brutally priced at £35 per month – that's several pounds more than most people pay for their ADSL service.

Nor is it unmetered: normal usage gives you between 75 and 150 hours using the service at 64Kbps, barely an improvement on traditional dialup.

Should you choose to ramp up your speed to its maximum 128Kbps this will eat into usage time and, once your allotted time is up, BT will charge you on a pay-as-you-go basis.

Launched at the beginning of June, BT has also failed to come up with always-on email, making it far more similar to narrowband than it is to broadband. Based on BT's Home Highway ISDN service, the only consolation is that the service will be available to 97 percent of the UK population.

The trail also appears to have gone cold on the satellite front. Despite a burst of activity from BT last year, the pilots for affordable residential satellite services have faded out. The problem is that there just aren't enough satellites to go round. Back in the dotcom heyday of the late 1990s companies promised to throw hardware into space like pennies into a fountain. Then the bubble burst, the pennies ran out and the satellites stayed on the launchpad.

Satellite broadband suppliers such as BT buy uplink capacity from the satellite owners, which can be anyone from the European Space Agency to private corporations. The suppliers then share out this capacity between users. Buying capacity from satellite owners is expensive – keeping a piece of complex communications equipment orbiting the Earth isn't cheap. These costs, inevitably, are then passed on to the end user.

The only broadband satellite services we could find that wouldn't break the average home user's bank account were one-way – that is, they are only broadband in a downstream sense; if you want to send files you're back to good old 56K dialup. So the minute you send a hefty email attachment to a friend, colleague or business partner, be prepared to wait. This one-way sector also seems to be dominated by no-name newcomers. The ISP giants – BT, AOL and Freeserve – are conspicuous by their absence.

The best deal we could find was from a company called e-NM, offering its Jetstream broadband service via the Eurobird satellite. A 512Kbps one-way download service will cost £31 per month, but upfront costs still put it beyond the means of most home users – £370.13 for the USB version or £252.63 for PCI card self-installation. ■

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