

Life in the fast lane

By Leslie Faughnan

BROADBAND may be the dominant technology topic of the day, but it's still a fairly exclusive club that only passed the 40,000-member mark a few weeks ago. According to the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, Dermot Ahern TD, Ireland had a grand total of 42,000 broadband customers as of 8 March last.

Membership of the club ranges from enlightened self-employed and residential users all the way up to the mighty multinationals, but with notoriously low take up by small to medium-sized enterprises still. The minister said there had been a dramatic and sustained take up of broadband and flat-rate services within the past six months "following his initiatives in driving down prices and promoting competition". Many will argue that the credit should be more widely shared but it is undoubtedly true that the Government has added its weight to the Commission for Communications Regulation's pressure on Eircom to reduce its rates to other operators so that the market could be stirred up.

In truth the business market for broadband has been surprisingly sluggish, with all telecoms companies conceding that they had overestimated the pent-up demand that would be released by the initial and much-delayed rollout of DSL services in 2002. The industry consensus appears to be that the clear understanding of the daily value of broadband — so visible and obvious to larger organisations and multinationals — simply had not penetrated the lower end of the business market.

The price barrier was a serious impediment to experiment and only the most tech-savvy consumers were willing to pay the premium for the service. Six months ago the

broadband club had just 13,000 members. This year the take-up speed has begun to accelerate at last with Ahern pointing out that there has been a 33pc weekly increase since broadband packages of €40 per month were introduced. Prices are continuing to inch downwards as resellers (and re-branders) of the Eircom service enter the market that should lead to even greater take up.

There is also an emerging but distinct possibility that ADSL as we now have it may have missed the boat — or at least have been overtaken to a fair degree by other technologies, just as ISDN barely had time to become a standard and universally available service before DSL technology began to hit the headlines. Wireless services, encouraged by the growth of Wi-Fi hotspots, offer similar services and rates to ADSL but with greater flexibility and speed of installation.

The 19 metropolitan area networks around the country, ESB Telecoms entry as an infrastructure provider and so on mean that wireless broadband offers entrepreneurial opportunities at local level. Backhaul internet access is then easily and competitively available through the fibre rings. In this context the €65m the Government is spending on fibre infrastructure as part of the National Development Plan is an investment that cannot but have a major economic multiplier effect on business — starting with the ICT sector itself at regional level.

A good example of some of these points is business ISP Netsource, the No. 3 provider of DSL after the Eircom and Esat BT. A current level of 2,000 business subscribers gives it a firm foothold, driven by the lowest rates in the market and a two-month rolling contract that takes any uncertainty out of the decision for small to medium-



Unbundling a local telephone exchange and making ready for ADSL. (Picture courtesy of BT and VisualMedia)

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sized enterprises (SMEs). Its services are also sold through the established IT resellers channel, which marketing manager Louise McKeown believes is a huge strength because the value of broadband is convincingly explained and demonstrated at the customers' local level. "That is why just about 45pc

of our customers have been opting for the entry-level product — they understand from the beginning what their own likely needs are," she says. It is telling that Netsource has entered the wireless broadband market: "We expect to have our 2Mbps corporate wireless service available throughout the Greater

Dublin Area in April and a presence in Cork within a further few weeks," Louise McKeown says, adding that the whole strategy is to offer broadband internet access through the customers' channel of choice.

The whole question of market education is belatedly being recognised as the

biggest challenge to take up. The blunt fact is that most Irish business people have never personally experienced the performance and advantages of always-on broadband. It is confused with the simpler notions of 'making internet performance faster' and perhaps unnecessarily fancy stuff such as multimedia and streaming video. Remote access from anywhere using secure virtual private network technology, one of the single most valuable applications, is hardly appreciated at all. "We have not really got the broadband story across," concedes Esat BT's Ray Tobin, key accounts manager. "And there certainly has not been enough competition to help the information process along. Now we are even seeing another problem because of lack of education — SMEs opting for consumer ADSL products and then being disappointed because the performance is not what they expected."

Esat BT is of course a full spectrum telco, so its broadband products start up in the carrier level stratosphere and descend through fibre connectivity and leased lines to DSL technology and fixed wireless, which Tobin believes will quickly attain a great deal of importance in the Irish market. "We are seriously pursuing the partnership route, talking to communities and local commercial interests — including Chambers of Commerce — so that we can provide the technology and internet backhaul for local networks." He is inclined to believe that this approach is more realistic than the Eirecom 'trigger programme', which invites smaller communities to register an interest in broadband: "Offering broadband to communities under 1,500 is fine in theory but with trigger levels of 300 or more it is a bit disingenuous because that is often simply unrealistic."

BROADBAND BRIEFS

No knocking Knockmore

ONE of the very first community broadband schemes is about to be switched on in Knockmore, Co Mayo. The Knockmore initiative has set up a Community Network Society to bring affordable broadband access to the community on a non-profit basis. "We should be up and running in a few weeks with the first 30 or so households participating," says chairman Paul Cunnane. Initial backhaul for the internet connection is expected to be based on a 2Mbps ADSL connection in Ballina relayed by wireless to the first node in the Knockmore region. Unlike broadcast wireless networking, needing at least one high mast in line of sight, this project is based on a mesh system where each access point is also a repeater linking to the next in a line of sight chain — neighbour passes on the signals to neighbour, in effect.

A case for local cable

CROSSAN Cable in Longford and Casey Cablevision in Dungarvan have enthusiastically entered the cable broadband market and are targeting local business and home users. "We have over 3,000 cable subscribers in the area," says Brian Crossan. "We already have over 100 broadband customers, both business and home, even though we are not officially launching the service until the end of the month." Crossan is offering a two-way service with 1Mbps downstream for just €39.90 a month to homes and €99 excluding Vat for business, both with maximum 20:1 contention. In Dungarvan, Casey Cablevision has been offering its Cablesurf.com broadband product for some years, now priced at €40 for home users and €90 for business with fixed internet protocol addresses and other services. What is really impressive is that Cablesurf is offering speeds of up to 4Mbps.

Fastest flats in Ireland

A BROADBAND communications service has been created exclusively for the residents of the 330 apartments at Custom House Harbour. The opportunity was spotted by Allan Brennan of Wireless Projects that made the pitch to the owners last year. These apartments are mostly for renting and the addition of the fastest residential internet access in Ireland has undoubtedly added to the market attraction of the properties. Invisible Access is the brand for a secure wireless broadband service launched earlier this month that gives users a 4Mbps internet connection for an astonishing price of just €99 excluding Vat annually. The five blocks are served by over 40 wireless access points and each apartment has what is technically a virtual private network connection over Wi-Fi to the base.

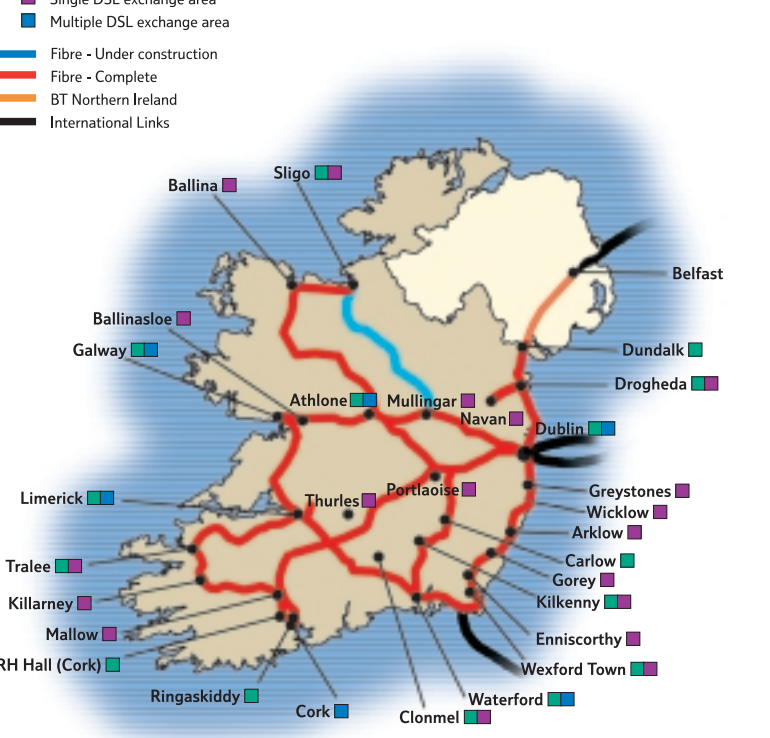
€25m for group broadband

EARLIER this month Communications Minister Dermot Ahern TD announced a €25m three-year scheme to help deliver high-speed internet into smaller communities — only communities under 1,500 population are eligible and there is no minimum threshold. The scheme offers 55pc capital funding, the maximum allowed under EU rules, with half of any grant payable when a scheme is 'commercially' launched and the balance when minimum subscriber targets are met.

Making the right internet connection

- Active WLL base stations
- Single DSL exchange area
- Multiple DSL exchange area
- Fibre - Under construction
- Fibre - Complete
- BT Northern Ireland
- International Links

A map of Esat BT's network infrastructure



is €199, self-installation is €99. All consumer prices include Vat.

Netsource www.netsource.ie

NETSOURCE is a fast-growing provider of all internet access products, specialising in broadband over DSL or leased line. New pricing and bundles for business start at €33 monthly (standard 512/128Kbps) and run up to €159 for 2048/256Kbps), with an initial self-install (€81.81) or engineer install (€165) charge for all products. Price progression is based on speed plus contention ratios (48:1 or 24:1), download limits (8GB, 16GB, unlimited), equipment (modem or four-port router) and website hosting and ISDN backup. Virus and spam trap service is €30 monthly extra. All Netsource business services have a two-month rolling contract. The residential offering is €30 excluding Vat.

Perlico Broadband www.perlico.com

LAUNCHING 1 April, Perlico Communications will offer Perlico Broadband, essentially its branded version of Eircom's product but at competitive price points of €45 excluding Vat monthly for business with an unlimited number of users sharing the connection over a local area network. Its consumer product will be €34.95 including Vat with an 8GB download cap, double the standard quota. Perlico has been offering a telephony service to business and residential customers since 2001. The DSL service will be national and the company intends to offer very attractive DSL internet plus telephony bundle rates to both business and residential markets.

UTV Internet www.utvinternet.ie

PRIMARILY aimed at the residential market, UTV Internet's Clicksilver service is the cheapest on the market as we go to press at €29.99 or €45 including Vat monthly with free DSL modem. Installation is €99. The two offerings have 48:1 and 24:1 contention ratios and 8GB and 16GB download volume caps with fixed internet protocol addresses. Attractively priced for general home users, small office, home office use may be deterred by the fact that Clicksilver is bundled with UTV Internet's carrier pre-select telephony service although the current call rates are very competitive.

Wireless

Amocom Net www.amocom.com

CORK wireless broadband access company Amocom Technologies now has most of the city in its coverage zone (with Ringaskiddy soon to be added) offering 512/512Kbps and 1Mbps/1Mbps services

for business and residential users. Price differentiation is principally on numbers of users, so Business Solo costs €80 per month while Business 1 (two to five users) is €105 and Business 2 (six-plus users) is €165. The 1MB Business 3 product for unlimited users is €199. All business services carry an initial setup fee of €365, all fees are payable quarterly advance. Residential users get a 512/512Kbps connection for €60 excluding Vat and €265 installation (including external receiver and 20-metre cable).

Irish Broadband www.irishbroadband.ie

WIRELESS pioneer Irish Broadband now covers almost all of Greater Dublin Area and has just added Cork City with Limerick, Galway, Dundalk, Drogheda and Waterford to follow by mid-year. Its Breeze business services start at 512/512Kbps for small office, home office with a 20:1 contention ratio at €75 monthly and €149 initial installation and connection. The Breeze Business offering lowers contention to 4:1 and adds web and email hosting for €135 while Breeze Business Plus moves up to 1Mbps down/up speed, leased-line backup and disaster recovery at €250 monthly. There are no traffic caps or users sharing the connection. Irish Broadband claims leased-line equivalent services at DSL prices and its wireless service allows for bespoke solutions, for example 1:1 uncontended at any speed, branch connections and so on, with quick installation.

The residential offerings are €30 excluding Vat monthly (512/128Kbps, 40:1 ratio) and 512/512Kbps or 1024/512Kbps speeds and 20:1 or 8:1 ratios for €35 and €48.40 respectively, ideal for serious teleworkers.

Leap Broadband www.leap.ie

EXCLUSIVELY for business with a service offering tailored accordingly, Leap Broadband offers high bandwidth wireless broadband in the Greater Dublin Area, with Cork, Limerick and Galway services promised by the end of the year. It describes its service as 'leased-line equivalent' with bundled web hosting, email relay, internet protocol addressing, virtual private network and other related services. Leap has three business packages, all offering 1Mbps down/up, and a 2Mbps/2Mbps Business Premium product, each of which also has a guaranteed minimum speed. Monthly rates are €199, €229 and €249 differentiated by the service level guarantee. The top Mbps product is €499 a month with 256Kbps guaranteed minimum. Leap also offers uncontended leased-line replacement services tailored to the client's needs, for example 2Mbps uncontended SDSL at €999 monthly. There are no download

limits, user number or other constraints. Installation is €299 standard, subject to site survey.

ESB www.esbtelecom.ie

ESSENTIALLY a 'carriers' carrier' ESB Telecom offers high bandwidth connections up to 34Mbps to other providers (for example Irish Broadband, Smart Telecoms) and larger organisations. But its extensive fibre network also offers wholesale rates to possible local providers, resellers, branded services or community and co-operative networks that can then offer a wireless service to end users.

Satellite

Aramiska www.gvd.ie

ARAMISKA.NET is a leading European-wide satellite broadband internet service for business sold in Ireland by GVD, a Co Dublin specialist in wireless and internet firewall products. Aramiska offers three service packages: 512/128Kbps at €299, 1024/256Kbps at €399 and 2048/512Kbps at €549. Installation is €750. Superficially more expensive, this is actually a managed service with guaranteed speeds, unlimited data transfer and user numbers, email service and web hosting, virtual private network capable, firewall, virus scanned and with 24x7 Freephone support. Contention is 8:1 down, 4:1 up with no latency issues.

Digiweb www.digiweb.ie

THIS two-way high-speed internet service from Digiweb offers speeds up to 1Mbps downstream for flat monthly rates depending on the speed (and a 15pc discount for annual accounts). Single user options are: 400/128Kbps for €99 monthly and 600/128Kbps at €135. Multi-user services offered are: 512/128Kbps — €139, 1024/128Kbps — €279, 2048/128Kbps — €549. In all cases the equipment cost is €1,290 and installation charge €299.

Orbitlink www.orbitlink.ie

THIS is a two-way high-speed internet service from Educom, which has a three-year track record in this market. Speeds can go up to 2Mbps, with special software to overcome satellite signal latency that would otherwise affect web browsing and virtual private network connections. It is available anywhere in the country. Single user options are: 400/128Kbps for €99 monthly and 600/128Kbps at €135. Multi-user services offered are: 512/128Kbps — €139, 1024/128Kbps — €279,

2048/128Kbps — €549. In all cases the equipment cost is €1,290 and installation charge €299.

Mediasat www.mediasat.ie

THE Mediasat range of broadband DSL products covers a wide range of speed and service options from this enterprising Cork-based firm specialising in satellite services for business from small office, home office up using the Astra European satellite. Entry-level products combine satellite download (ie one-way service) with a flat-rate internet access product from Eircom.net or other internet service provider. So monthly costs start at just €15 for the satellite stream plus the €29.99 for the Eircom flat-rate access (both excluding Vat). More serious business users will look at two-way services with router for shared use on a local area network.

Cable

Chorus Cablenet www.chorus.ie

CHORUS is currently providing its Cablenet cable modem service in Kilkenny, Clonmel and Thurles. It gives a 512Kbps/128Kbps service for €35 including Vat over the TV charges with a €50 connection fee. These areas are accepting new subscribers, including businesses at the current €75 rate, which includes support, fixed internet protocol addresses, email and so on. This pricing is expected to be reviewed downwards shortly in line with the general broadband market. There are current plans to provide similar services in Cork, Limerick and nine other towns by connecting upgraded networks to the metropolitan area networks that have been Government funded under the National Development Plan. Chorus also has a powerful fixed wireless service called Powernet serving the Limerick City and east county and north west Tipperary area from Keeper Hill, currently closed to new subscribers.

NTL www.ntl.ie

NTL offers three variants of its cable access in west Dublin (Lucan) and around the general Tallaght and Dublin 24, 22, 16, 12, 6 and 6W areas. Further rollout depends on network upgrading, which is anticipated in various areas in the coming months. Simple always-on internet access at 150/64Kbps costs €30 including Vat monthly on top of the TV service. Smarter products are NTL Broadband 600/128Kbps at €40 and NTL Broadband Max 1024/256Kbps at €50. Contention is 20:1 for all products.

DSL

Esat BT www.esatbt.ie

ESAT BT has DSL-enabled over 40 exchanges in its own right as well as retailing Eircom's wholesale product since the 'final mile' to customers' premises is still almost 100pc Eircom. Top level international and internet connectivity is through giant parent BT. Business Internet access gives choice of three DSL broadband products: 512/128Kbps and Rate Adaptive at €90 monthly, 1024/256Kbps at €175 and 2048/256Kbps at €340. Installation is €125.64 or €150 for the 2MB product (technician) and equipment with network connection is supplied with all. Contention ratio is 24:1 for all three and there are no download caps and no limit on number of users.

Residential broadband from Esat BT is under the established IOL brand, with two ADSL products and a set of combination phone and internet packages at attractive fixed monthly rates. IOL Broadband offers 512/128Kbps services at €39 monthly with 48:1 contention and 8GB data transfer cap or Broadband Plus — same speed but 24:1 contention and 16GB data allowance. Modems (USB/Ethernet) are included and the Plus product adds

Norton Security 2004. Connection charges €90 and €80 respectively. Telephony bundles (all-Ireland calls with no limits) start at an additional €33.15 monthly. Consumer prices include Vat.

Eircom www.eircom.ie

EIRCOM has now DSL-enabled over a million phone lines and is committed to a trigger programme for smaller communities and rollout to all towns within the next year. It offers three business ADSL products — Business Starter 512/128Kbps and Rate Adaptive at €45 monthly, Business Plus 1024/256Kbps at €89 and Business Enhanced 2048/256Kbps at €169. Installation is €165 (technician) and €81.81 for all. Contention ratio is 24:1 for all three, four-port modem is standard, download caps are 8GB and 12GB with no limit on the Enhanced version. Static internet protocol (IP) setup charge of €50 applies to the two lower-level products.

Residential ADSL from Eircom comes in two 512/128Kbps versions: Home Starter at €39.99 gives contention 48:1, maximum download 4GB, upload 1GB and no static IP. Home Plus brings contention down to 24:1 with four-port modem, unlimited upstream traffic and 8GB download cap with Static IP for a €60.50 setup charge. Technician install

