



## **Rural Advocate Visit to Alston Moor**

January 2009

*Summary of the visit looking at broadband provision in rural areas*

### **General Information**

The Rural Advocate and Chairman of the Commission for Rural Communities, Dr Burgess, went to visit Alston, in Cumbria, in order to find out more about provision of broadband in rural areas. The reason for visiting Alston, was to meet Daniel Heery and colleagues at Cybermoor, a innovative rural broadband co-operative. Cybermoor was founded in 2003 through a Government initiative called Wired up Communities. The original funding of approximately £1,000,000 provided PCs for 675 households; wireless broadband network for homes and businesses; community website; helpdesk support; £250,000 for local schools and some adaptive equipment and training for disabled users.

Over the six years to date, Cybermoor has developed wireless infrastructure to supply broadband and BT has since upgraded its exchanges in the area, to provide a competitive service. Despite its initial work and ongoing search for funding, and Daniel's ability to secure grants, Cybermoor has struggled to maintain market viability. As a consequence, they have developed a project to provide fibre connected broadband in conjunction with wireless provision. This mixed form of service provision will help improve connection speed and provide a service equal to most urban areas, in Alston Moor.

### **Main Findings**

Here are the key findings which were pulled from the visit:

1. A variety of people had been able to develop their businesses due to having broadband availability in their area e.g. Sue, a local potter, who runs her business from home was able to advertise and sell her pieces online, as well as attracting new business for her pottery lessons.
2. Customers were able to stay in the area, as they could work from home e.g. Simon, a lawyer, was able to work from home 2-3 days per week as well as working at his main practice in Sutherland and Newcastle.
3. Cybermoor estimates that its benefit to the community includes:
  - a. 25% use PCs to work from home – 7.4% national average;
  - b. 26 jobs created;
  - c. Economic value to Alston is over £300,000; and
  - d. SMEs supported with e-commerce, website design and general advice
4. Alston Moor hospital has, through Cybermoor, developed a video conferencing facility which it hopes to upgrade to a much higher broadband capacity. At present, the facility operates from a community centre in the hospital and can contact a major hospital (and its specialist staff etc) for remote diagnosis and patient care.

This hospital was on the verge of being closed before the broadband facility was installed, making it a much more viable local option.

5. Lack of high-speed broadband coverage means innovative and integrated service delivery is very difficult to achieve, despite many good ideas and motivation.
6. The decision by Cybermoor to develop their service provision (by providing fibre connected broadband) was the result of strategic thinking about the way fibre could be provided in a very sparsely populated area, as well as alternative funding options to improve commercial viability. Given this, over the long term it may be possible to partner with private industry, such as BT, for whom providing fibre broadband in rural areas isn't presently commercially feasible. The high cost of trenching work to lay fibre cable was mentioned several times. Cybermoor are planning to use local labour to reduce costs, and helping recycle money into the local community.

### **Follow-Up Actions**

The information which we gathered on the visit will be used to compliment the work that our Rural Services team are taking forward in respect of their work on digital inclusion. In addition, key contacts that we made on the visit will be followed up, and we will continue to liaise with Cybermoor as an example of best practice in rural areas.

For more information on the visit please contact:  
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