

Firms hope hub brings net gain



FAST BROADBAND: Edward Keene, right, of Highnam Business Centre, with Peter Cartwright of Loop Scorpio. Photo: Paul Nicholls

by Luke Sellers

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AN award-winning internet hub in Highnam could help Forest firms in their fight for better broadband.

The village won the economic development and enterprise category at the recent Calor Village of the Year Awards, where it was praised for its super-fast internet.

Judges at the awards said: "The village's IT equipment made available to the Rural Business Centre and older residents has the fastest broadband connection in the UK, so the business community is able to compete effectively."

This is in stark contrast to the central Forest area, where firms are concerned they may have to move unless their broadband speed improves.

The company behind Highnam's high-speed broadband is Gloucester-based Loop Scorpio Ltd. Peter Cartwright started it six-and-a-half years ago to provide broadband in areas not reached by BT.

He said: "We started at a time when BT was rolling out broadband in cities and urban areas but it didn't include the smaller towns and villages."

"We decided to use broadband from Gloucester and take it into those areas using wireless networking."

The company now has more than 400 customers across its networks in Highnam, Newent, Ledbury and Painswick. Customers include both homes and small businesses.

The speed of internet varies from 20mb at Highnam Rural Business Centre where the network is linked to a hired fibreoptic cable and 5mb for the wireless network in Newent. This is considerably faster than internet in the central Forest, which is thought to run at an average of 2mb. Loop Scorpio's symmetric pro technology means that business customers can get high speeds into their computer and also when sending files.

A report published this week from government watchdog Ofcom says customers around the country do not get the broadband speeds advertised. The problem is worse in rural areas because of the outdated copper cabling used by the major firms.

The Forest also struggles to pick up wireless signal because of its heavily

wooded area and hilly landscape.

Peter says while his company can't help people in remote areas, Loop Scorpio is planning to bring faster broadband to parts of the Forest such as Cinderford. To do that the company would have to transmit the wireless signal to the ridge above Cinderford before beaming it into the town.

He said: "Our wireless technology can currently reach 11km so if there were a reasonable number of businesses in Cinderford that wanted the service we could set up a wireless cluster there. We are currently talking to companies and hope to be in Cinderford by the end of the year."

The lack of wireless coverage currently available in the Dean is a concern for tourism in the area. With the closure of the tourist information centres, visitors are being asked to go online to find out about accommodation and activities.

At the last full meeting of the district council a question was raised asking how the council would answer tourists' questions given the lack of internet coverage. Coun Patrick Molyneux, cabinet member for economic regeneration, said the council was trying to improve the tourism website.