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Broadband through three-pin socket ready for mass trials

Telecoms Challenge: Fixed-line and mobile operators face fresh competition for internet supremacy

By Michael Harrison

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Full-scale commercial trials of a new technology which allows householders to connect to the internet through the three-pin electrical sockets in their homes are about to be launched.

Scottish & Southern Energy will today announce that it is beginning mass trials in Hampshire and Stonehaven in the north of Scotland with a view to making the telephone-free service widely available within the next five years.

The technology has the potential to undercut conventional telecoms and cable companies such as BT and NTL and bring broadband access to more remote rural areas which are presently deemed uneconomic to serve using conventional fibre-optic cable.

United Utilities, the electricity and water supplier for the north-west, experimented with a similar concept in the late 1990s using the electricity distribution network to carry voice calls and data but scrapped the trials

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because of technical problems.

However, S&SE believes it has overcome the teething troubles after a six-month pilot scheme in the Scottish towns of Crieff and Campbeltown involving about 70 homes and small businesses. Ian Marchant, the chief executive of S&SE, estimated it would cost about £1m to link up a town with a population of 20,000. "If we can half the capital costs then within five years you could see the technology in common use," he said.

All that is required is a black box which boosts the signal at each electricity sub-station and a special modem in the home to connect the PC or laptop in the nearest three-pin wall socket. There are no telephone rental or call-up charges and, unlike broadband services supplied by BT and cable companies, the band width leaving the house is as great as that entering it, enabling users to download and send large documents at speeds of 2,000 kilobits per second.

In a speech today, Jack McConnell, Scotland's First Minister, will welcome the trials, which are being backed with funding from the Scottish Executive as a means of bringing broadband to the highlands and islands in a way that hydro-power brought cheap electricity 60 years ago.

Angus Armstrong, who runs a small structural engineering consultancy in Crieff and took part in the pilot trial described himself as "a very happy guinea pig", adding that the service had exceeded his expectations from day one.

During the pilot trials, S&SE has charged £25 rental a month for domestic customers and £45 for business users.

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