

Chairman's AGM Report 2014

CMNet is one year old and we have ordered our first ADSL line and expect to start our volume trial within the next few weeks.

It has been a long and sometimes winding road to get to this point.

Dissatisfaction with our appalling broadband performance started in December 2009 when tests showed it was not possible to obtain download speeds better than 0.5 Mbps.

Email exchanges with BT followed over the next few months and by February 2010 we understood that our exchange was part of the Exchange Activate program and was capped at 0.5 Mbps. Our hopeless 0.5 Mbps bandwidth was the best we would ever get unless BT were to upgrade our exchange.

After 30 months of frustration we became aware of the work done by Peter Buneman in Arnisdale and attended a meeting at SMO on Skye in October 2012. Presentations from local groups who had managed to develop, implement and run their own broadband systems gave us the confidence to investigate the possibility of doing the same ourselves.

It soon became clear that the equipment was not prohibitively expensive and we could easily set up our own basic system funded by loans raised locally.

To start the project we used a loan from the Community Council in March 2013 and bought enough equipment to set up a test environment to allow us to become familiar with the equipment and confirm we could get it to work.

In April a steering group was set up to work on the broadband project consisting of Phil Game, Joe Grimson, Geoff Harrington, Hamish Howat Hurst, Mary MacBeth and Neil MacRae.

By May we had gained enough experience to allow us to run tests from Plockton to Achmore.

In June the steering group met with CBS and at that meeting and subsequent meetings we discovered that our go it alone approach would not be the best policy. It emerged that there would be nothing to prevent a commercial ISP offering an alternate service in competition with our own system. Any rival system would be based on an upgraded network which would have been subsidised by public money. We therefore decided it was too risky to finance the project entirely through loans from potential subscribers and we had little choice but to apply for a grant from CBS to assist with the capital costs.

In June we ran a public demonstration in the Hall to show the speed obtainable through a wireless link from Plockton exchange. This was well received and we very quickly had most residents "signed up" for our proposed system.

The response to the demonstration led to the decision to set up our own company to design, build and run our broadband system. On the 14th August 2013 CMNet CIC was born; the founding members being the members of the steering committee.

Once CMNet was formed we set about producing a business plan to submit to CBS to back up our grant application. As part of this process we surveyed all the properties belonging to subscribers that had committed to join the new system. As the CBS grant is a one off application and it is not possible to have a phased approach to the financing our grant application had to cover the costs of every piece

of equipment, every nut and bolt and all the services required to implement the entire system. A considerable amount of time was spent checking the price of every component and every service required to take the project from the first day to completion.

Work also started on the administration side of CMNet with forms being drafted for Customer Contracts, Mast leases, Hosting agreements and Loans.

Our application was submitted to CBS on the 21st August 2013 for a grant of £33,339, which is 89% of the capital costs, the maximum percentage allowed. In September we received an email from CBS which appeared to suggest our application would be rejected. However at a subsequent meeting with CBS in October we were surprised to be told that our grant application would be approved for the full amount requested.

On the 28th October we received documentation from CBS confirming we would obtain a grant with one precondition; which was that we have a signed mast agreement in place before we could draw down grant money. Obtaining confirmation that our mast lease was fit for purpose from the solicitors became our top priority.

In November we made very little progress as our current broadband service (BT not CMNet) was more or less unusable.

In December we resumed work on the mast lease but were beginning to become increasingly concerned about the performance of our solicitors who had failed to meet their self imposed target dates on several occasions. Finally in March, two months after giving them details of proof of identity and seven months since we first made contact and gave them our documents to check, we decided enough was enough and we parted company. We are now using the same solicitors as the Fernaig Trust and they have proved to be very helpful and responsive.

We explained our solicitor problems to CBS who fortunately agreed to waive the precondition of the Mast Lease and allowed us to start to draw down some of our grant money. As soon as funds were released we ordered enough equipment to set up the volume trial and install about half of the domestic equipment. We then made the Loan document the top priority as we would need to raise loans to cover the 11% of capital costs not covered by the CBS grant. The loan document was processed quickly by the solicitors and our request for the first round of loans was oversubscribed.

In March community groups over the West Coast began to discuss the possibility of setting up and running our own backhaul service. The nearest location where a leased line can be purchased is Fort William and the proposal is to use very high speed wireless links to relay the service as far north as Applecross. This resulted in another meeting at SMO on Skye in April which most of the community broadband groups in the area attended and it was decided to proceed and take the project further.

Formal approval for the use of Plockton High School finally came through in April, almost six months after we started the process to request permission.

By June we had configured all the equipment needed for the backbone on Creag Mhaol and Plockton High School. We built the relays on Creag Mhaol and then discovered that our estimate of power cable was a few metres short causing a brief delay whilst we purchased a joint.

In July we had lengthened the cable and restored power using a temporary supply which allowed us to complete the testing of the equipment on Creag Mhaol.

In the past few weeks we have tested the link from the school to Creag Mhaol and started the installation of our equipment at subscribers' premises.

As we celebrate CMNet's first birthday we are about to start a volume trial to determine how many subscribers can be supported through one ADSL line through the Plockton exchange.

Once this is complete we will be able to start the process to roll out the system to all those who have decided to join.

There are many people who have helped CMNet get to this point:-

Firstly I would like to thank my fellow directors who have all freely given their time and expertise.

Local residents; Liz MacRae in Plockton who allowed us to use her broadband link so we could run the demonstration in Achmore Hall, Duncan Gibson for his help getting all the equipment up to the top of Creag Mhaol, Fay Mackenzie and Dolly Chisholm who have so kindly given us permission to use Creag Mhaol for our relays, Eric and Elizabeth Morrison who have allowed us to use their mains power whilst we wait for our own supply to be installed and Jim Coomber for helping locate the power cable at the base of Creag Mhaol.

Duncan Ferguson, Susan Galloway, Crisdean MacRae and Willie Morrison all helped at Plockton High School and I would also like to thank Robbie Bain and everyone at the Highland Council that helped us get formal approval to use the school.

Our councillors; Biz Campbell, who gave us the contact details for Peter Buneman which started us down this road and Audrey Sinclair for her guidance and for her work on our behalf on the relevant committees.

Although CBS have not really lived up to their billing as "more than just the purse keepers" I would like to thank Sandra Byrne for helping us get our grant application processed.

Thanks are also due to the Community Council for its support; all those that have given CMNet a loan and everyone that has "volunteered" to participate in the volume trial.

I would also like to thank all our potential subscribers for being so patient whilst we battled against "the system".

Finally we would have achieved nothing without the help of Peter Buneman and Will Waites who have always provided their invaluable expert advice and guidance whenever asked.

I look forward to next year as the year that Achmore, Strome Ferry, Braeintra, The Glen, Craig and Ardnarff finally say goodbye to the 0.5 Mbps cap imposed by our local BT exchange.