

Virgin Media and e-Learning Foundation to provide free broadband for children from low-income families

UK's leading residential broadband provider links with national charity to improve digital literacy

27 November 2008:

Virgin Media, the UK's leading residential broadband provider, today announced it is giving free broadband access to 500 children from low income families, who are not already connected to the internet at home.

The project is part of Virgin Media's 'Power to all People' initiative and is in partnership with the e-Learning Foundation and UK online centres. Both organisations work to tackle the digital divide - the e-Learning Foundation is a national charity working to ensure UK school children have access to the internet at home, while UK online centres around the country support adults with the skills and confidence to use ICT effectively.

Low income families from 16 primary and secondary schools in five cities - Birmingham, Bristol, Newcastle, Nottingham and Liverpool - will benefit from this initiative. Each family involved in the project will receive a free fibre optic broadband connection for a year, together with training for parents at UK online centres to help demystify computer use and the internet and give guidance on how to keep their kids safe online.

Neil Berkett CEO of Virgin Media, said: "We're delighted that our involvement in this project is going to give children from low income homes the chance to get online at home and improve digital literacy for their families. The internet has fast become a key part of many people's social and educational development and we strongly believe that broadband services should be available to everyone, regardless of their circumstances."

Jim Knight, minister of state for schools and learners, said: "Bridging the digital divide is the one of the great challenges over the next few years – that's why the Government has launched a £300m programme, which aims to ensure every child has access to a computer and internet at home by 2011. There has to be a culture where families see home access as important as making sure their children have pen, paper and calculator at school. The bottom line is that having home access is no longer an optional extra – it is fast becoming essential. I welcome excellent initiatives like this – it shows what is possible when industry pulls together with the voluntary sector and schools to make low-cost home access a reality."

Valerie Thompson, Chief Executive of e-Learning Foundation, said: "We are delighted to join forces with such a high profile partner as Virgin Media on this pilot to further our work in closing the digital divide in this country. Access to learning technologies at home has been proven to significantly influence educational outcomes, yet low income families are five times less likely to own a home computer than high income families. Technology shouldn't be a privilege, it should be available to everyone and this scheme will go a long way to bridging the gap."

Over 2 million* children in the UK do not have access to the internet or a computer for their home studies. Schools taking part in Virgin Media's project are members of the e-Learning

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Foundation's affiliation network and already have an established e-learning programme in place to provide children with access to laptops at home for their studies.

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Notes to editors

* Family Spending survey 2006/7

About Virgin Media

Virgin Media is an innovative and pioneering UK entertainment and communications business. For the first time consumers can get everything they need from one company - the UK's only quad-play of TV, broadband, phone and mobile, plus the most advanced TV on demand service, all delivered through its unique fibre-optic cable network. Virgin Media launched the UK's first high definition TV service, is the only TV platform to carry BBC iPlayer, and offers a high-specification, HD-ready V+ personal video recorder. Virgin Media is the UK's largest residential broadband provider, the largest virtual mobile network operator and the second-largest provider of pay TV and home phone.

Virgin Media owns two content businesses - Virgin Media Television (VMTV) and sit-up. VMTV owns seven entertainment channels – Virgin1, Living, Living 2, Bravo, Bravo 2, Challenge and Trouble - and is a 50% partner in UKTV which consists of ten channels including Dave, G.O.L.D, Watch and Alibi. sit-up runs retail TV channels bid TV, price-drop TV and speed auction TV.

Virgin Media has been voted the sixth Most Loved Brand in Britain in a Marketing magazine poll, as well as having been voted the Most Trusted ISP Brand 2008 by Reader's Digest magazine. The Sunday Times also awarded Virgin Media its 2008 Best Buy awards for broadband and movies on demand.

Virgin Media is the largest Virgin company in the world and has almost 10 million customers. To find out more visit www.virginmedia.com/presscentre.

About the e-Learning Foundation

The e-Learning Foundation was launched in 2001, to ensure that every schoolchild in the UK should have home access to learning technologies when and where they want to learn.

The Foundation, a registered charity, aims to bridge the digital divide and ensure that all children, irrespective of their background, can have the same access to technology for learning at home as their better off peers. The estimated cost of this runs into £billions, so is unlikely to be provided by Government alone.

The Foundation is funded through the public, private and third sector in the form of Government grants, commercial sponsorship, grants and donations.

Schools can become affiliated to the e-Learning Foundation if they meet the core criteria which are:

- They operate, or plan to operate, an equity scheme whereby every student has the same opportunity to take part regardless of their parent's ability to contribute
- The students can take the computers home in the evenings, weekends and school holidays
- Most parents are asked to contribute so that the programmes are sustainable and can be extended and replicated

About UK online centres

UK online centres provide millions of people with access to technology and support in using it. There are thousands of centres across England offering free or low cost access to the internet and email, delivering online courses and encouraging people to progress onto further learning. For more information please visit www.ukonlinecentres.com

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About the Department for Children, Schools and Families

The Prime Minister announced a £300m nationwide programme in September 2008 to give all seven to 18-year-olds access to broadband Internet and a computer at home. From February 2009, Oldham and Suffolk local authorities will pilot the programme; up to 20,000 local pupils from low-income families could qualify for financial support, covering the cost of a computer; software; Internet access for one-year; and three years of technical support – with further funding available this year to target specific vulnerable groups without computer or broadband access at home, including looked after children and pupils in alternative provision. The Government educational technology agency, Becta, has also launched a quality-mark scheme for approved home access suppliers – which will be announced in spring 2009.

Media contacts

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