

Free wi-fi

A British city has become the first in the UK to have free wi-fi for the public. Are there any benefits for businesses?

- 1 Check you know the following words and abbreviations. Create sentences with them.

wireless	network	laptop	PDA
antenna	hot spot	broadband	wi-fi

Wi-fi: popularly thought to be an acronym for 'wireless fidelity'; enables wireless access to the Internet.

- 2 Complete the missing figures in the Fact Box. You can find the answers by scanning paragraph one of the article.

Norwich: free wi-fi project			
(a) Cost of the project		(c) Number of antennas	
(b) Length of the project		(d) Number of connections (Week 1)	

Norwich: a giant 'hot spot'

Norwich is in the news. The city in the east of England has begun a project which offers free wi-fi to the public. The pilot project will cost over £1 million, and is intended to last for 18 months. The technology involves placing 200 antennas around the city, mainly on lampposts. This creates blanket wi-fi coverage. It means you can get an Internet connection as you walk through the city streets! It has effectively made the city into a giant hot spot. There were 1,800 connections in the first week. This figure rose to over 2,500 in the second and 3,000 in the third week.

The experiment follows on from developments in the US where Google has enabled blanket wi-fi coverage in Mountain View. Other places in the States are doing the same. Phone calls over a wi-fi connection do not use the mobile phone network, so free wi-fi has the potential to reduce expensive phone calls. However, user reports suggest that free wi-fi is not as reliable as a home Internet connection.

Over in Norwich, very few technical problems have been reported. Although connection speeds are not as fast as broadband at home, public-service workers are speaking out about the benefits. For example, they do not have to go back to the offices in order to access information systems.

Engineers and other workers in the field can place orders online. While this kind of communication is usually done via mobile phones, some workers feel that using a PDA can be more useful and efficient. However, the wi-fi network is unsecured, so it is not advisable to send sensitive information

Previous to this pilot project, the only way to get Internet on the move was to connect at a limited number of hot spots such as those found in airport lounges and Internet cafés. The cost of connecting in this way can be relatively high. The pilot system is not in competition with commercial companies, such as T-Mobile. One key question remains: will 'free' wi-fi stay free forever?

- 3 Read the whole article. What do you learn about the pilot project?
- 4 Complete the word formation grid with the adjective and noun form of the verbs (a-f).

VERB	ADJECTIVE	NOUN
(a) to advise		
(b) to rely on		
(c) to benefit		

VERB	ADJECTIVE	NOUN
(d) to compete		
(e) to access		
(f) to use		

- 5 Discuss the following questions in small groups. Be ready to report back on your findings to the class.
- Do you think free wi-fi is a good idea? Why / why not?
 - How would free wi-fi in your town or city affect the way you work?
 - In what way(s) do you think communication technologies will change in the future?