

Sharing wireless broadband – taking precautions

By Dan Cole, head of product management at THUS plc

In the last two years the cost of Internet connections and PC hardware has decreased considerably, resulting in a dramatic increase in the uptake of Wi-Fi broadband across the UK. With more than one million Wi-Fi users, the technology is now becoming a de facto standard in both the business and the home. Wi-Fi enables a broadband Internet signal to be shared by PCs around the home or within a 'Wi-Fi hot spot', without the need for cabling. But now that most Wi-Fi systems use a signal range from 30-50 metres, the sharing of a wireless broadband connection goes beyond the boundaries of the average residence.

As Wi-Fi uptake continues there is a growing trend for residential neighbours to share their wireless broadband connections in order to cut down their individual broadband usage costs. By doing this, neighbours can share the cost of high speed Internet access between them. In other words several users can benefit from just one Wi-Fi connection.

Despite the obvious cost benefits that come with sharing a Wi-Fi connection, there are a number of factors regarding security that need to be taken into account when considering adopting this approach.

The connection's owner should be aware of the responsibility they're taking on themselves; they must, for example, be certain that the network has adequate security measures in place. One of the most basic measures is to ensure users cannot access each other's personal information files or be attacked from the outside world. Most systems allow users to lock their network with entry only through a pin. Other measures include installing a firewall as well as wireless encryption protocol (WEP) and MAC address filtering, which protect wireless traffic by using a key to encrypt data. The key is shared between all computers that need access. With trends like 'war driving'— where someone drives around in a vehicle "hunting" for insecure wireless broadband connections to piggy-back onto and "borrow" bandwidth from – on the increase, it is more important than ever to be sure that only approved individuals are accessing the shared connection and all data crossing the network is encrypted and secure. With these precautions in place, users can enjoy the benefits of sharing wireless without having to worry about security breaches.