

We found that you could save thousands by using independent heating engineers

British Gas quotes leave us cold

UTILITY PRODUCTS

If your boiler has let you down this winter and you're looking for something more efficient, don't assume you'll get the best deal from the biggest name.

After several members highlighted wide gaps between British Gas quotes and other quotes for boiler replacements and services, we decided to investigate.

We compared British Gas quotes against those from independent central heating engineers recommended on Which? Local (www.which-local.co.uk) and found

that it charged up to twice as much as the lowest-priced independent engineer for the same job.

British Gas quoted £3,997 to replace a 12-year-old combination

British Gas gave Jill the highest quote for boiler work

boiler with a new Vaillant ecoTEC pro 28 in a one-bedroomed flat in London. We found the boiler online for £725.

For the same work, independent engineers quoted £2,000 and £2,300.

Spot the price difference

Which? member Jill Fox (left), from Nottingham, was looking to replace a 15-year-old heat-only boiler with a modern combination boiler.

British Gas advised her that a combination boiler was unsuitable for her property and quoted £5,106 for a heat-only model.

However, two independent engineers found on Which? Local said that installing a combination boiler wouldn't be a problem, as long as it was the right size, and priced the work at £2,485 and £2,888.

TAKE ACTION!

■ Save on energy bills

Visit www.switchwithwhich.co.uk to see how much you could save on gas and electricity bills.

Meanwhile, Which? member Phil Tideswell, from Manchester, said that British Gas quoted £3,457 to replace a heat-only boiler with a modern condensing equivalent, while local contractors asked for just £1,700 and £1,940.

British Gas said: 'It is difficult to provide a succinct comment, given that in all these circumstances British Gas were just one of a number of quotes the consumers explored and we didn't actually install any of the boilers.'

Savings on boiler fitting What we found

	Replacing combination boiler (London)	Replacing heat-only boiler (Nottingham)	Replacing heat-only boiler (Manchester)
British Gas	£3,997	£5,106	£3,457
Lowest quote	£2,000	£2,485	£1,700
Saving	50%	52%	51%

A consumer calls... Vodafone

Activating mobile broadband service proves trickier than expected...

When testing mobile broadband services last autumn, a flyer in our Vodafone mobile broadband pack told us to call 0845 440 1010 to set up our direct debit, and to have our bank and Sim details to hand

FIRST ATTEMPT Vodafone
recorded message: 'Welcome to

the Vodafone Mobile Broadband Startup line.' The line hangs up.

SECOND ATTEMPT Vodafone
recorded message: 'Welcome to the Vodafone Mobile Broadband Startup line.' The line hangs up.

THIRD ATTEMPT Vodafone

recorded message: 'Welcome to the Vodafone Mobile Broadband Startup line.' An engaged tone for a few seconds, then the line hangs up.

FOURTH ATTEMPT We give up and call 0808 004 4423 – a free number found online for

prospective customers. After 15 minutes, someone answers who can't help us or explain why the previous number hadn't worked. He eventually transfers us to someone who can set up the direct debit.

Look out for our full test of mobile internet providers next issue.

Which? members rate JD and JJB Sports badly for staff and premises

One star for sports shops

RETAIL SERVICES

Unknowledgeable staff top the list of things you find most irritating on the high street, our survey of your shopping experiences has shown.

In our annual high-street retailer survey, we asked for your biggest gripes in shops. More than half found unknowledgeable staff the most irritating, while unhelpful staff and difficulty finding staff were also common complaints.

Our results show that some big names are getting it wrong. You gave 11 retailers one star out of five for overall store environment and staff, including Matalan and discount stores Lidl, Netto, TK Maxx and Primark, as well as sports stores JD, JJB and Sportsworld.

Happy shoppers

But it's not all bad news. Four of the 96 retailers mentioned in our survey scored an impressive five-star rating for environment and staff, as did five types of local independent stores.



Staff at Lush are given regular training in skin and hair care

They were supermarket Waitrose (which came top in our survey overall), its sister department store John Lewis, cosmetics shop Lush (pictured above) and book store Waterstone's.

One Waterstone's fan commented: 'It's a joy to shop where staff are actually interested in what they are selling.'

Which? talked to Waterstone's and Lush to find out how they ensure customers are satisfied.

Lush told us that customers are key – around 500 of them act as mystery shoppers for the company, and every store is mystery shopped once a month.

Staff are given regular training in skin and hair care and get new products to try at home so they can advise customers on what to use and how.

Waterstone's uses mystery shoppers from an external agency once a month and it makes sure that it employs passionate readers – they are responsible for writing the recommendation cards you see on the bookshelves in Waterstone's stores.

■ For the full story, see page 36.

Online dating sites rated

PERSONAL SERVICES

More than 4.5 million people in the UK visit online dating websites each month, according to internet research company Comscore. If you're one of those looking for love online and want to know which site is best, a new Which? survey may help.



As we went to press, which.co.uk was surveying users of the most popular online dating services to find out which are rated most highly.

Look for the results at www.which.co.uk/online dating on 9 February.

The report will show customer satisfaction scores for some of the most popular online dating sites, along with individual ratings to help you decide which is the right one for you.

When Which? Online surveyed dating site users in 2008, nearly three quarters had experienced some level of success, with one in four finding a long-term relationship.

Online dating sites gaining the highest satisfaction scores last year were Gaydar, iSingles, Plentyoffish and Guardian Soulmates.

Sharp takes product reliability to a new level

KITCHEN PRODUCTS

While we were testing new microwaves for our latest report (see p60), five members contacted us to say that their Sharp Carousel microwave ovens had been cooking dinners for well over 20 years. The Sharp Carousels cost about £230 back in the early 1980s.

Ann Cottenham (left), from Norfolk, told us: 'My husband bought me a Sharp Carousel in 1984 and I've been using it daily ever since. The only thing that's failed is the interior light.'

'I've just purchased a new one to match my new kitchen but will keep the old Sharp as a spare.'



INVESTIGATION



Comfort Inn, London



Ibis, Manchester



Ibis, Manchester

Which? Holiday raises the alarm over cleaning standards in some budget hotel rooms

Heading off for a dirty weekend?

HOTEL SERVICES

If you're planning a break on a budget this year, you may be shocked at what *Which? Holiday* found lurking beneath the sheets in some budget hotel rooms.

In an undercover snapshot investigation of five budget hotel chains, researchers found stained mattresses and duvets. One mattress was so badly soiled that mould was growing on it. One duvet had a stain that looked like blood.

Researchers also found rooms with mould around the bath, urine streaked down the toilet and faeces on the toilet seat, as well as high levels of dust on some carpets and rooms with food debris scattered around the floor.

When *Which? Holiday* inspected 16 rooms across London and Manchester last autumn, Ibis performed particularly poorly. The mouldy mattress and apparently blood-stained duvet were discovered at Manchester's Charles Street Ibis, where a researcher also found dried peas on a bedroom carpet.

Travelodge also performed poorly in the research. In the Manchester Blackfriars Street room, mould was found around the bath, while urine was streaked down the pedestal and on the floor.

Comfort Inn and Jurys Inn performed well in the investigation: all rooms were clean, although London's Chad Street Comfort Inn had a stained mattress, which has since been replaced.

Premier Inn rooms inspected in Manchester were spotless, but cleaning standards at the two in London could have been improved.

Travelodge and Ibis have investigated and remedied any problems with the rooms inspected and said they take cleanliness and hygiene very seriously.

Lorna Cowan, editor of *Which? Holiday*, said: 'There doesn't seem to be a single accepted standard for hotel hygiene across the UK. We would like to see this change.'

As a result of this investigation, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health has asked *Which? Holiday* to help facilitate the establishment of a national standard for hygiene in UK hotels.

One mattress was so badly soiled that mould was growing on it

Your story Compensation trail goes cold

Rod Unger has been seeking redress for inadequate financial advice – but with no luck

Poor financial advice and red tape has proved costly for *Which?* member Rod Unger.

In 1996, Rod's accountant suggested he invest £200,000 in venture capital trusts (VCTs). He was referred to financial advice firm Moorgate House. But Rod's adviser failed to highlight that VCTs are very high risk. Rod invested £200,000; five years later, the value had fallen to £52,000. An independent adviser

from another firm told him the advice had been inadequate.

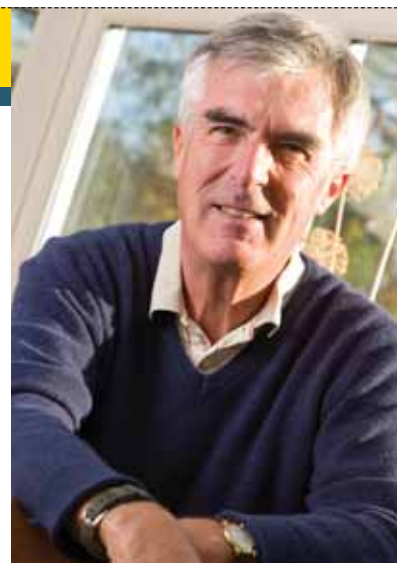
The Financial Ombudsman Service agreed and ordered Moorgate House, which had changed its name to MHMH, to pay Rod £100,000. But MHMH was then wound up, so the FOS ruling no longer covered him.

Rod went to the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, which ruled that Rod's accountant had given the advice, not

MHMH. Rod couldn't pursue the accountant in court as too many years had passed. Rod is still out of pocket. He said: 'You might think the system is there for you, but it isn't necessarily so.'

TAKE ACTION!

■ Make sure your independent financial adviser is suitably qualified. For help, visit www.which.co.uk/financialadviser



PHOTOGRAPHY SIMON WRIGHT. FRANCINE LAWRENCE. GETTY IMAGES. ALAMY

Survey reveals what the public wants from long-term care

91% say home is best

OLDER PEOPLE'S SERVICES

Tomorrow's older people want a care system that can help them stay in their own home, our survey of nearly 3,000 people has found.

As part of our recent research into long-term care, including the use of assistive technology (see p47), Which? found that 91% of those surveyed would make staying at home their first choice, even if they needed assistance.

The results come as the government prepares to overhaul the long-term care system and its funding in England. Details are expected this spring. Reforms are also being planned elsewhere in the UK.

Help at home

22% of those surveyed said that assistance with practical jobs would help most, and many agencies say demand for help with things like gardening or turning a mattress is increasing. Assistance varies across the UK, but the English government has announced that more cash will be available for this from April.

61% said they'd prefer professional carers for personal care, rather than people they know. But many councils in England have restricted who qualifies for such care, often to people with critical or substantial needs. In Scotland, where personal care is free, what councils offer varies.

UK governments are beginning to fund assistive technology, however. This is good news, as survey respondents said distress alarms were the second most important requirement for staying at home. But, as with personal and home care, what's available differs locally.

Battle to stay put

At present, it can be a struggle to get the right support, as carer Francine Lawrence told us. She was determined that her mother, Joan (pictured above), should stay in her own home despite having advanced dementia. Although Joan might not remember whether she has eaten on



Creature comforts: our survey showed that many of you want to be able to keep your pet even if you have to move

a certain day, she still gets pleasure from her garden and her cat Jamie.

A care home wasn't best for her, as most don't take pets. But Francine found that many carers couldn't do jobs outside of their guidelines, such as cooking a meal from scratch. Joan was left anxious and without the right help.

Francine said: 'I found an agency providing great live-in carers from overseas. However, when Mum's income became low enough for social services to fund her care, we had an incredible fight to use the agency. We took advice from organisations such as Counsel and Care, and we won. Mum is happy and calm, and enjoying the companionship.'

Many councils in England have restricted who qualifies for personal care at home

Addressing the problem

Claire Lilley, Which? senior policy adviser, said: 'People want a system that allows them to stay at home and be supported but independent in old age. For those who choose or need to move, there must be desirable alternative housing.'

'Creative thinking is needed to cater for the needs of this diverse group and, in the coming months, we'll be urging the English government to address this.'

In brief

DRUG ADVERTISING VICTORY

Which? campaigning has helped dilute European proposals to advertise prescription medicines to consumers. We were concerned that people could confuse advertising for patient information. In the US, where advertising is allowed, people have demanded branded drugs from doctors when cheaper, equally effective generic alternatives are available.

Amendments to the plans mean that adverts will only be permitted in health-related publications (not general print media) and in the UK they will have to be approved by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency.



ESTATE AGENT REVIEW

Our campaigning has resulted in the government agreeing to investigate estate agents, including whether fees are competitive. It will also look at making home improvement packs more consumer-friendly. We'll update you on news, but visit www.which.uk/housingmarket in the meantime for advice on buying and selling homes.



WHICH? INDEX

Member research has shown that you want Which? to retain its index, but it could be printed less often. So, we'll be printing a six-month index four times a year – the next will be in April. See *Which?*, January 2009, p82, for our most recent index.