

Broaden your horizons

Broadband speeds are going up and prices are coming down. There's never been a better time to switch

Can't face the hassle of switching your internet service provider (ISP)? It might not be as stressful as you first think. Readers Dave Lloyd (right) and Julie May (below) found switching straightforward and now enjoy faster internet access.

Dave saved money and, while Julie pays more for broadband than she did for dial-up, she says: 'Dial-up was so slow and unreliable that the benefits of broadband easily outweigh the extra cost.'

David and Julie aren't the exceptions, either, because 83 per cent of switchers in our latest survey said the switching process was easy.

If you're like Julie and are still using dial-up internet access, see 'Dial-up to broadband', opposite, where we explain what broadband is and how to switch over to it.

If you're already using broadband, you might still benefit from switching to a better deal. You can check our table on p22 for Best Buys. All the providers shown had more than 50 per cent very satisfied customers in our survey. The cheapest providers didn't do well for service so don't make it into our table, but if price is a priority we have details for many more providers at www.which.co.uk/broadband.

Broadband to broadband

In 2004 many ISPs signed up to a voluntary code of practice that was designed to make switching between broadband providers much easier. The code applies only to broadband services that use BT phone lines (also called ADSL broadband) and not to services offered by cable broadband providers NTL and Telewest.

If your ADSL provider is signed up to the code (find out at www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/codes/bbm_cop) and you're not tied into a contract, switching should be straightforward. Follow these steps:

- 1 Decide which provider and service you want to switch to.
- 2 Contact your existing provider and ask it for your Mac (migration authorisation code) which lets your new provider make the switch for you. Don't cancel your service. Your ISP has five working days to give you your Mac and it's valid for 30 days.
- 3 Give your Mac to the new ISP. It will arrange the transfer and tell you the switchover date. You should be without broadband for only a few minutes. If you have broadband over a cable phone line you won't be able to switch ISP unless you also



SWITCHING PROVIDER WAS STRAIGHTFORWARD

Dave Lloyd 26, media manager
'Switching between broadband providers means I pay less for faster speeds. Switching was easy and the transfer almost instantaneous. I switched on my computer after a weekend away and my new service was up and running.'

Many ISPs signed up to a code designed to make switching between broadband providers much easier

have an active BT line. To switch to or from cable broadband, you'll need to cancel your old service and sign up to your new one.

A slow switch

Switching broadband provider isn't always entirely trouble-free. While most major ADSL broadband providers are signed up to the Mac agreement (as are all three of our Best Buys), many smaller ISPs aren't. This could help explain why 19 per cent of broadband switchers in our survey found the switching process too slow. If your ISP is not signed up to the code, it's still worth asking for a Mac, but you might have to resort to cancelling one service and waiting for it to clear the line before signing up to your new ISP. This process is often called 'cease and reprovide' and if you end up doing it, make sure you ask your old provider for the date that your service will end. You may be without broadband for several days, or even weeks.

Some ISPs offer services known as local loop unbundled (LLU). This means that, instead of renting BT equipment to offer

JULIE ENJOYS SURFING WITH BROADBAND

Julie May 39, financial controller
'I put off switching from dial-up to broadband because I hardly ever used the internet. But as soon as I got broadband I was away. It's great for online banking and my husband Paul loves surfing car sites. I wish I'd signed up earlier.'



Otelo or Cisas after 12 weeks. Every ISP must belong to one of these dispute resolution schemes.

Dial-up to broadband

If you're switching from a dial-up service to broadband, you'll be pleased to know that most people we asked found it easy – only 7 per cent of people we questioned said they found it difficult. Follow these steps.

- 1 Choose a broadband provider using our table on p22.
- 2 Check how long it will need to set up your new service (you'll probably have to wait several days) and what, if any, equipment you'll need to buy. Some providers will give you a free broadband modem or router and microfilters for your phone. Alternatively, you can buy these from computer retailers.
- 3 Cancel your dial-up subscription (subject to your contract terms and notice period), timing it so that you won't be left without internet access for long. If you use a pay-as-you-go dial-up service, you don't need to cancel, and dial-up can be a handy back-up if there's a problem with your broadband connection.
- 4 Ask your chosen broadband provider to activate broadband, then install the equipment. Unless you're moving to a cable service for the first time, you'll need to install broadband yourself. Most people find it straightforward but, according to our survey, one in six people experienced problems. A call to your ISP's technical helpline should help (our table shows which companies offer good telephone support).

When dial-up is best

If you don't use the internet much (11 hours or less a month) and download speed isn't a priority, a pay-as-you-go dial-up service might work out cheaper than broadband. If you don't need to surf during peak hours, some ISPs offer good-value off-peak packages.

We have details and satisfaction ratings for 13 dial-up ISPs at www.which.co.uk/dialup. Waitrose is our only Best Buy, with 78 per cent of customers telling us they are very satisfied, but Claranet, where 57 per cent of customers are very satisfied, is also worth considering.

their services, ISPs put their own equipment in BT exchanges. The advantage is that they can offer faster speeds than BT because they are not limited to using BT equipment.

But the disadvantage is that switching away from an LLU service is likely to take longer, even if the provider's signed up to the code. This is because the LLU provider often has to manually switch equipment in the exchange.

Telecoms regulator Ofcom recognises that the current switching system needs reviewing and recently completed a consultation on how to improve it. If your ISP makes it difficult for you to switch away, let Ofcom know by calling 020 7981 3040.

Billing problems

It's not uncommon for your old ISP to continue taking payments after you've switched, and 19 per cent of broadband switchers in our survey had had this problem.

This could partly be down to timing. ISPs charge monthly, not daily, so if your switch happens a day after your old company bills you, you'll end up paying double for a month. To avoid this, ask your new provider in advance how long it will take to set up the switch from when you hand over your Mac.

If you're certain that your old ISP has billed you in error, request a refund. If this fails, follow its complaints procedure, and keep records of all communication. If you still don't get anywhere, you can take it up with either

Future trends

Service offerings and prices are continually changing. We look at the most recent trends

Bundled services

Following NTL's purchase of Virgin Mobile this year (the company will be rebranded Virgin next year), you'll be able to bundle four services – digital TV, phone, broadband and mobile. The trend is called fourplay or quadplay. It will mean fewer bills and is likely to be cheaper than buying individual services. But before taking bundled services from any company, ask yourself:

■ DOES THE COMPANY HAVE A REPUTATION FOR GOOD SERVICE?

NTL came in the bottom three for satisfaction in our ISPs survey and last year's home phones survey. We'll be publishing the results of this year's phone survey next month.

■ DO THE INDIVIDUAL SERVICES SUIT YOU?

The broadband package

offered by some firms might limit how much you can download.

■ DO YOU WANT TO BE ABLE TO SWITCH?

Buying services together will mean you're tied into a contract for all services.

Free broadband

Sky, the Carphone Warehouse and Orange (which has merged with Wanadoo) have launched 'free' broadband services. Sky Broadband Base is free to Sky digital subscribers. The Carphone Warehouse requires you to take out its Talk3 International plan (£21 a month including line rental). Orange's free broadband is available only to pay-monthly mobile customers on a tariff costing £30 or more. Both services require an 18-month tie-in. For more, see www.which.co.uk/broadband.

MEMBER BENEFIT

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Computing Which? is the UK's only completely independent computing magazine. Offering impartial, jargon-free advice on everything from the absolute basics, through to product reviews and step-by-step guides to help perfect your know-how, it's your essential computing companion. Call us today on **0800 252 100** and your first two issues will be free.



Zen received top ratings from its customers across the board



Still have questions?

We answer your questions about switching

Q Will I lose my email address if I switch ISP?

A Yes, unless you switch services with the same provider. If you're on pay-as-you-go dial-up, you can still access the dial-up service even if you've switched to a different provider. You don't have to use a provider's email account. You can use an independent one, such as www.gmail.com, www.hotmail.com or www.yahoo.com.

Q I'm in a 12-month contract. Can I switch?

A Not without paying a hefty cancellation fee

(from around £50 to the rest of the remaining contract). You can switch to another package with the same provider, but some restart a 12-month tie-in.

Q Do I have to have a BT line to get broadband?

A You do if you use an ADSL provider but not with NTL or Telewest. Having a BT line doesn't mean you must use BT. The Carphone Warehouse and the Post Office use BT's network but you pay rental to them, not to BT.

Q Is broadband less secure than dial-up?

A You can have broadband on constantly if you choose, meaning there's a bigger opportunity for hackers. Cut your risk by using a firewall and anti-virus software, and keeping it up to date. *Computing Which?* suggests AVG Free Edition anti-virus software and Zone Labs ZoneAlarm firewall.

Q Do I need a new modem or router if I switch?

A If you're switching from dial-up to broadband, you'll need a broadband modem (around £20). Your provider may give you one free.

77% Zen Internet

Zen received top ratings from its customers almost across the board. Customers rated it highly for ease of set-up, customer service, online and phone support, speed and reliability. This is the second year in a row it has been awarded Best Buy status, although with high-speed packages starting at £24.99 for a service of up to 8Mbps, which is capped at 20GB a month, it's only average for value for money.



WE LIKE Zen ties you in only for a month at a time, with no cancellation fee if you switch.

Speed Up to 8Mbps Data transfer limit 20GB or 50GB, depending on price Line activation £47 Min contract term 1 month Free web space 1,000MB Apple Mac compatible Yes Technical helpline 0845 number

Facts & scores

News from our latest survey of providers

Less than half are very satisfied

We found that less than half of customers of the four biggest broadband ISPs, BT, NTL, AOL and Telewest, were very satisfied with the service they received. The best of them was Telewest with 47 per cent, then BT with 34 per cent, followed by AOL (25 per cent) and NTL (20 per cent).

Metronet

We found that 76 per cent of Metronet customers rated it as good value for money. Its packages start at £11.75 a month but you pay extra for some services that other providers include for free, such as an email account (£8.81 a year).

BROADBAND ISPs	PACKAGE DETAILS						EASE OF SET-UP	VALUE FOR MONEY
	CHEAPEST MONTHLY COST (£)	PACKAGE	SPEED (Mbps)	LIMIT (GB)	TIE-IN (months)	PHONE SUPPORT		
1 ZEN Internet (96)	25	8000 Active	8	20	1	0845	★★★★★	★★★★
2 GLOBAL (32)	20	MAX	8	5	12	0870	★★★★★	★★★★★
3 WAITROSE (111)	19	Broadband	8	5	12	0800	★★★★★	★★★★★
4 UTILITY WAREHOUSE (36) ^b	18	Broadband 512	0.5	no limit	12	75p	★★★★★	★★★★★
5 ECLIPSE (127)	15	Evolution Option 1	8	see ^c	1	0845	★★★★★	★★★★★
6 FREEDOM2SURF (184)	14	Cascade Start	8	0.5 ^d	6	0870	★★★★★	★★★★★
7 NILDRAM (91)	14	Broadband 2gO Lite	8	0.25	1	0870	★★★★★	★★★★★
8 METRONET (135)	12	PAYGo Option 1	8	0.4	1	0870	★★★★★	★★★★★
9 PLUSNET (588) ^e	10	Broadband PAYG Basic	8	0.05 ^f	1	50p	★★★★★	★★★★★
10 PIPEX (442)	15	Start	8	2	12	0845	★★★★★	★★★★
11 DEMON (298)	20	Home 8000	8	no limit	12	10p	★★★★	★★★★
12 FORCE9 (68) ^e	10	Broadband PAYG Basic	8	0.05 ^f	1	50p	★★★★★	★★★★★

The table shows the cheapest packages that are 0.5Mbps or faster ^a We didn't have enough responses for a rating ^b From Telecom Plus ^c 20GB at peak times (6pm to midnight). No limit off-peak ^d Unmetered from 1am to 6am ^e Force9 is part of the PlusNet group. Many packages are identical but they trade separately and received different scores in our survey ^f Pay-as-you-go package. Costs 0.224p a MB above this limit

USING THE TABLE

We list the cheapest package from the 12 ISPs with over 50 per cent very satisfied customers. Best Buys have over 70 per cent very satisfied customers based on our survey. Number of customers surveyed for each ISP is in

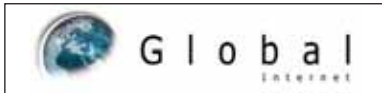
brackets. Details for other ISPs, including cable companies, are at www.which.co.uk/broadband. The more stars the better.

Package details

Cheapest monthly cost The cost per month to the nearest £1,

excluding short-term offers.

Speed The maximum download speed achievable. This can vary depending on your distance from the exchange and the number of people sharing your connection (called the contention ratio). **Limit** The maximum amount of data you



72% Global

Global is the only new entry as a Best Buy this year and scored top marks for customer service, ease of set-up, reliability of connection and connection speed. Not enough people had used Global's telephone and online help for us to be able to rate these aspects of its service. Its broadband packages start at £19.99 a month for an 8Mbps service capped at 5GB per month, but they are available only on a 12-month contract.



WE LIKE Global includes a free router, which allows you to network together other PCs, and free line activation as part of the broadband package.

Speed Up to 8Mbps Data transfer limit 5GB Line activation Free Min contract term 12 months Free web space 100MB Apple Mac compatible Yes Technical helpline 0870 number



72% Waitrose

Best Buy for the second year in a row, Waitrose did quite well for reliability of connection and value for money and got top marks for everything else, including customer service. It offers only one broadband package costing £18.99 a month for a service of up to 8Mbps, which is capped at 5GB a month. Line activation is free, as is your modem, which you can keep if you switch to another provider. The main downside is the 12-month contract tie-in.



WE LIKE Waitrose has a free technical helpline if you run into problems.

Speed Up to 8Mbps Data transfer limit 5GB Line activation Free Min contract term 12 months Free web space 50MB Apple Mac compatible Yes Technical helpline 0800 number

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES

We'd like to hear your experiences of dial-up vs Broadband, including switching or getting connected. Please email your stories to letters@which.co.uk or write to us at **Which? PO Box 44 Hertford X SG14 1SH**

Checklist

Tips for choosing the right broadband package

- **How long is the tie-in?** A 12-month contract will make it more expensive to switch.
- **What download speed do you need?** 2Mbps is ample if you mainly use the internet for surfing, sending emails and downloading the odd music track. Check the upload speed, too. Speeds of only 256Kbps could be frustrating if you send big attachments.
- **What actual speed can you get?** Advertised speeds are a maximum; the real speed will depend on your distance from the exchange. Ask the provider what speed you can expect before you sign up.
- **How much does the helpline cost?** This is particularly important if you're new to broadband.
- **What's the monthly limit?** 5GB should be plenty for browsing and emailing, but if you're planning to download big files, such as movies, or share the service with several users, an unlimited service might be best. If your service is unlimited, ask if there's a fair usage policy.
- **What happens if you exceed the limit?** Some ISPs are flexible with occasional overuse, but others charge a fee. Global and Waitrose charge £2 for each additional GB.

Our research

In April 2006 we carried out an online survey: 15,693 members told us how satisfied they were with their ISP and how they felt about switching.

Details of more than 100 broadband packages are updated monthly at www.which.co.uk/broadband

WHICH? SURVEY PERFORMANCE

CUSTOMER SERVICE	ONLINE SUPPORT	PHONE SUPPORT	RELIABILITY OF CONNECTION	CONNECTION SPEED	2005 BEST BUY	SCORE %
★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	✓	77
★★★★★	see ^a	see ^a	★★★★★	★★★★★	n/a	72
★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	✓	72
see ^a	see ^a	see ^a	★★★	★★★	n/a	64
★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	✓	63
★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	✓	63
★★★★★	see ^a	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	✓	63
★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	✓	60
★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	✓	57
★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	✓	57
★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	✓	55
★★★★★	★★★★★	see ^a	★★★★	★★★★★	✓	54

Prices correct at 7 July 2006

can transfer each month. 1GB is 1,024MB. **Phone support** The type of number you have to call for technical support, or the cost per minute of calling. 0800 numbers are free, 0845 numbers cost up to 4p a minute and 0870 numbers cost up to 8p a minute from a BT landline.

Survey performance

2005 Best Buy A ✓ indicates that the ISP was also a Best Buy in our 2005 survey. n/a indicates that a company is new or that we did not receive enough responses for it in 2005 to give it a rating.

Contacts

The Carphone Warehouse
0800 049 1212
www.talktalk.co.uk
Cisat 020 74217444
www.arbitrators.org/cisat
Demon
0800 027 3737
www.demon.net
Eclipse
0845 1224 111
www.eclipse.net.uk
Force9
0845 1400250

www.f9.net.uk
Freedom2Surf
0870 242 3758
www.freedom2surf.net
Global
0870 909 8100
www.globalnet.co.uk
Metronet
0845 140 0083
www.metronet.co.uk
Nildram
0800 197 1474
www.nildram.net

NTL
0845 045 0020
www.ntl.com
Orange
0870 1900 672
www.orange.co.uk
Otelo
01925 430 049
www.otelo.org.uk
Pipex
0845 077 2455
www.pipex.com
PlusNet
0845 1400200
www.plus.net

Utility Warehouse
020 8955 5555
www.utilitywarehouse.co.uk
Telewest
0845 142 0220
www.telewest.co.uk
Waitrose
0800 980 0018
www.waitrose.com
Zen Internet
0845 0589000
www.zenbroadband.com