

ISP SATISFACTION

Prices have fallen as speeds have risen, and 6.2 million UK homes now have broadband internet access. It could be time to switch

The number of internet packages is bewildering – along with promises of free modems, discount rates, free content and super-fast speed, firewalls and virus protection. To help you sort the good from the bad we've weighed up the options – helped by our survey of more than 15,000 internet users.

DIAL-UP OR BROADBAND?

Dial-up internet access is all some people need, and if you live in a rural area, broadband may not be an option. But broadband is now accessible to about 97 per cent of the UK's homes, and BT aims to increase that to 99.6 per cent by the end of 2005.

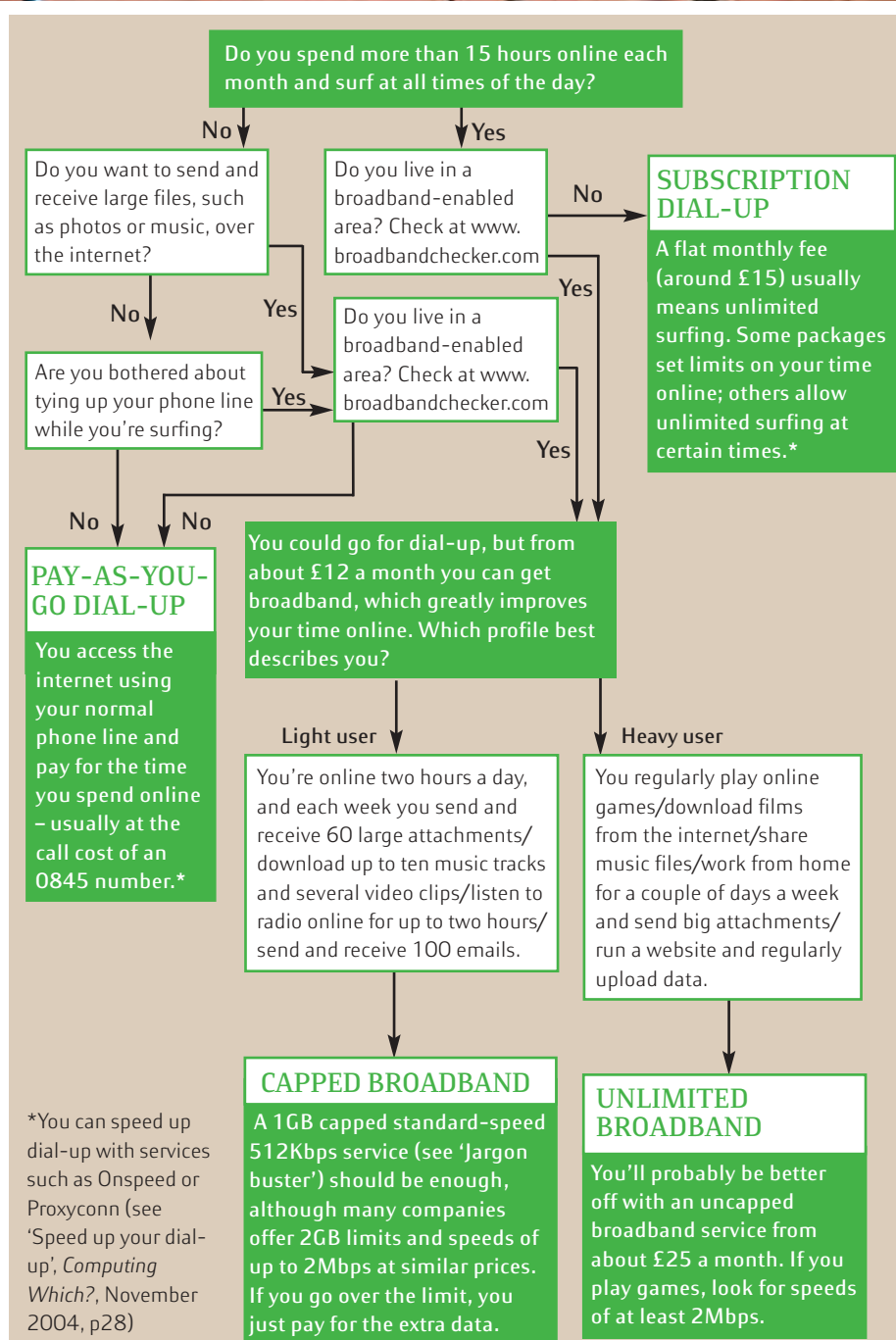
Broadband speeds vary according to provider and the speed of your local telephone exchange. The standard broadband speed of 512Kbps is about ten times faster than a normal dial-up service, but in some areas it's available at 20, 40 and even 140 times the dial-up speed. This means you can download big documents, images and music files in seconds rather than minutes. Your PC can be permanently connected to the internet without clocking up huge phone bills, and you don't need to wait for your PC to dial an access number. You can even talk on the phone while surfing.

On the downside, you may need to buy extra equipment to get connected. Many broadband contracts make you sign up for a full year, and with most services you pay a fixed monthly fee, even if you don't use it much. High-speed connection makes it easier for viruses to infect your PC, so you definitely need some security software. And if you leave your computer connected permanently, there's electricity and environmental costs to think about.

Our chart, right, gives guidance on whether dial-up or broadband is best for you.

BROADBAND

There are two main ways of supplying broadband. Cable broadband is available in Telewest and NTL areas – covering about half of UK homes. Broadband through BT's copper-wire phone network is now available to 97 per cent of UK households via BT or a third party. But the remaining 3 per cent who live in rural areas that are not close to a telephone exchange



set up for broadband still can't get the fast service – although BT is investigating wireless broadband to give everyone access. One expensive option is satellite broadband technology – see 'Broadband via satellite', *Computing Which?*, May 2004, p29.

Most broadband packages currently charge a monthly fee, but some limit how much information you can download and upload – usually to 1GB or 2GB a month. Once you go above this limit you pay for the extra – usually about £1.50 per extra GB. Sometimes these packages are called 'lite' or pay-as-you-go broadband. Uncapped services are usually more expensive – for example, Nildram charges £25.99 a month for its uncapped service and £15.99 for its capped 1GB option.

Many broadband providers offer only annual contracts, so you're tied to them for a year. These companies usually don't charge for activation and include a free modem – saving you about £100 in total. But some now offer flexible monthly contracts – though they may require you to reimburse them for equipment if you switch from them after a short period.

JARGON BUSTER

Kbps and Mbps

Kilobits per second and megabits per second describe the speed of your connection to the internet. A dial-up connection usually has a speed of 56Kbps, so a 2Mbps broadband connection is about 40 times faster.

GB A gigabyte is a measure of the amount of information you've exchanged over the internet. 1GB is equivalent to about 800 large digital photos or 200 music tracks. It's used to specify limits on broadband packages.

BEST BUYS

Computing Which? will look in detail at broadband next month, including customers' experience of switching ISPs; here we give a summary of the results. At www.which.co.uk/broadband you'll find more details on broadband packages and features, updated every month.

Overall standards are high, and our Best Buys don't just have to do very well for overall customer satisfaction – they also have to score top marks for service and be more than average for ease of set-up, connection speed, reliability and technical support. Our graph (left) shows how many customers were very satisfied with their broadband service.

Metronet did very well in every key area. It offers only a pay-as-you-go service – but the price is capped if your usage is higher than expected. Its standard 512Kbps service starts at £10 a month for 200MB, capped at £19.96, which equates to about 5GB usage. It also offers 1Mbps and 2Mbps packages with various usage levels. Its pricing is complex, but customers gave it top marks for value.

Freedom 2 Surf scored well in all categories and was rated above average for support. Its 2GB-capped 2Mbps service costs £14.99 a month but isn't metered between 1am and 6am – useful if you're a night owl. It also rated highly on value for money.

Zen Internet did well on most points, but at £24.99 a month for a standard 512Kbps

service, it's certainly on the pricey side. It's one of the few ISPs that still offers 256Kbps access, but at £17.99 it costs more than some services that are twice the speed.

Nildram was rated only average on value for money but did well on all other key points. Its Broadband 2 Go service gives 1GB for £15.99 a month – the speed depends on your local exchange. For £22.99 a month you can get an uncapped 512Kbps service. Both packages are available on monthly contracts.

Eclipse did well in most key categories, although it didn't score as highly as some other Best Buys for value for money. It offers variable speeds up to 2Mbps, depending on your local exchange. Its 1GB capped package costs £14.99 a month, with 5GB for an extra £4.

PlusNet scored well on all the main ratings. Its uncapped Broadband Plus service comes at speeds of up to 2Mbps for £14.99 a month.

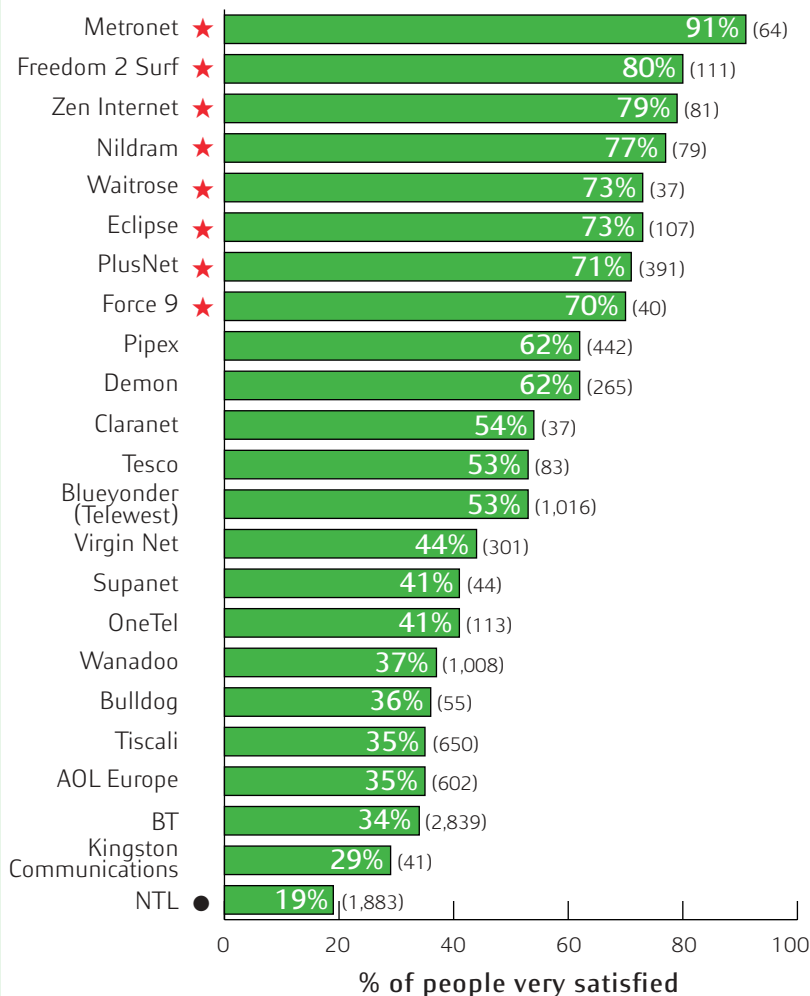
Waitrose, with a 512Kbps service for £23.99 a month, and **Force 9**, with capped and uncapped services from £14.99 a month, scored well in most areas, although we didn't have enough replies from people who'd used their technical support to rate this.

DON'T BUY

NTL was one of the worst broadband providers in last year's survey and was also rated well below average on every point this time.

Broadband satisfaction

The graph below shows the percentage of users in our survey who were very satisfied with their broadband provider. Figures in brackets are the sample size. ★ = Best Buy ● = Don't Buy



DIAL-UP

For some users, dial-up internet access may be their only option. Others have a pay-as-you-go dial-up connection as back-up to a broadband connection – indeed, 5 per cent of people in our survey use both.

At www.which.co.uk/isps you'll find more details on dial-up ISP packages, such as whether you need a BT line. The information is updated every month.

BEST BUYS

Our Best Buys have to get top marks for overall satisfaction, be above average for customer satisfaction, connection and reliability, and be at least average in all other aspects.

Waitrose customers seem particularly happy with all aspects of its service. Its £14.99-a-month subscription includes free technical support. It was the only dial-up service to get top marks for phone help.

Claranet was above average in all key areas except value for money, for which it was only

average. It offers some unusual Freetime packages of limited off-peak access for a monthly fee; its pay-as-you-go package is called 'an unlimited free trial'.

Although **Demon** did well for overall satisfaction, its customers didn't think it was particularly good value for money – its subscription packages start at £11.75 a month, but you have to pay call charges on top.

PlusNet and the BBC did well on overall satisfaction in our survey but we didn't get enough respondents to rate them in all areas.

DON'T BUY

Some famous providers seem to be infamous when it comes to dial-up service. NTL was the only ISP rated well below average. Although its dial-up service wasn't rated as badly as its broadband one, it still did poorly in every area.

BT and Tiscali have nothing to recommend them, either: they were average for online help and poor for everything else. AOL and Wanadoo only just escape a categorical thumbs-down thanks to good online help and AOL's ease of set-up.

OUR RESEARCH

In April 2005 we carried out an online survey, asking how members how satisfied they were with their internet service providers: 15,538 members completed the survey, a response rate of 74 per cent.

FREE TRIAL



Computing Which? is packed with information and tips on how to get the best from technology, whether it's your computer or your digital camera. For a free trial, ring 0845 307 4000.

TABLE NOTES

Sample

Number of users We've included all dial-up ISPs with 30 or more responses.

Customer satisfaction

Connection How reliable and speedy it was.

Online support/Phone support Customers who'd had problems were asked to rate their online and phone help. The samples aren't big enough to give ratings for every ISP.

Overall Percentage of very satisfied customers.

Cost

Monthly cost Price of standard (unmetered) subscription with access at any time. Some ISPs have a 'fair limit' of 120 hours or so a month.

KEY

★ ☆ ○ ● ●
Best —————> Worst
■ Best Buy ■ Don't Buy

ISPs	Sample	Cost	Customer satisfaction						
	Number of users	Monthly cost (£)	Ease of set-up	Value for money	Customer service	Connection	Online support	Phone support	Overall (%)
DIAL-UP									
Waitrose	102	14.99	★	★	★	★	n/a	★	74
Claranet	77	14.99	★	○	★	★	n/a	★	69
Demon	59	19.99	○	●	★	★	n/a	★	68
PlusNet	30	14.99	n/a	★	n/a	○	n/a	n/a	53
BBC	37	14.99	★	○	n/a	●	n/a	n/a	51
Tesco	176	12.49	○	★	○	●	★	○	45
Which? Online ^a	222	n/a	○	○	★	●	★	★	45
Virgin Net	267	12.49	★	○	○	●	○	○	42
UK Online	63	13.99	○	○	★	●	n/a	n/a	41
One.Tel	175	13.99	○	○	○	●	★	○	40
Blueyonder (Telewest)	53	14.00	○	●	●	●	n/a	n/a	36
Supanet	90	11.99	○	●	●	●	n/a	●	34
Care4free	31	13.99	★	n/a	n/a	●	n/a	n/a	32
AOL Europe	394	15.99	★	●	○	●	★	○	24
BT (BT Yahoo Anytime)	543	15.99	●	●	●	●	○	●	23
Tiscali	437	14.99	●	●	●	●	○	●	23
Wanadoo	753	14.99	○	●	●	●	★	●	23
NTL	218	12.49	●	●	●	●	●	●	17

^a This ISP is no longer available to new subscribers