

Broadband changed my life

Those of you with broadband love it. We look at the difference that a high-speed, always-on internet connection can make

Broadband is the internet as I always hoped it would be – instant communication, fast-loading sites, and the ability to send and receive large files by email. Reader Sue Herbert isn't alone. According to our latest survey, people who subscribe to broadband services love the high speed and reliability of their always-on internet connection. Another plus is the fact that it leaves your phone line free while you surf.

But it's not perfect. Only half of you are satisfied with support from your broadband internet service provider (ISP), and switching ISPs can be a

headache. So it's a good idea to follow other users' recommendations. Blueyonder, Demon, Pipex and PlusNet's broadband services come out top in our latest ISP survey (see 'Satisfaction with ISPs', p34).

However, it's not as simple as just picking an ISP: most providers offer different priced options depending on the speed and type of access. We've recommended a few packages for different users overleaf, and you can compare full details of 150 packages at www.which.co.uk/whicheextra. In case broadband doesn't appeal, we've also got details of the best traditional dial-up services (see p35).

YOUR QUESTIONS

We unravel the mysteries with answers to your most common queries about broadband.

AVAILABILITY

Can anyone get broadband?

BT is aiming to make broadband available to 99.6 per cent of households by June. Those missing out are likely to be in remote areas (check at www.bt.com/broadband). Cable broadband provides an equivalent service, using cable phone lines instead of BT's network. Between them, NTL and Telewest offer cable broadband to around half of all households – mainly in urban areas. Other options are limited. Some companies offer wireless broadband (using radio signals) to rural areas but coverage is patchy. Another alternative is satellite broadband. 'One-way' satellite services, which let you download at broadband speeds, are available for around £20 a month, but you need a dial-up service to upload – to send emails, for example.

CHOOSING A SERVICE

What does broadband cost?

Broadband services start at around £15 a month, rising to more than £30: prices vary according to

the connection speed you opt for, and how much data you download. Unlike with some dial-up services, you don't pay for the time spent online.

How many broadband ISPs are there?

Around 50 ISPs provide broadband via BT phone lines (known as ADSL) so you need to pay BT line rental to use them. You don't have a choice of ISP with cable broadband – NTL or Telewest act as your ISP. One exception is AOL's Gold service (£24.99 a month), which is available to NTL customers. You don't have to subscribe to cable TV or phone services in order to receive cable broadband.

Do I have to sign an annual contract?

Many ISPs insist you sign up for a year but some smaller ISPs offer monthly contracts. Try Bulldog, Eclipse, Force9, Freedom2surf, NDO, Nildram, Pipex, PlusNet, V21, Virgin, Vispa or Zen Internet.

What speed do I need?

Most people opt for 512 kilobits per second (Kbps) – about ten times faster than dial-up. This should let you download a 3 megabyte file (a three-minute MP3 track, say) in about 45 seconds, rather than eight minutes. If you mainly email and surf the net, 256Kbps is probably fast enough. For really speedy downloads, go for one megabit per second (Mbps).

How much can I download?

Many providers limit how much you can download and upload to anything from one to 40 gigabytes

YOUR VIEWS

We asked all 2,538 members of our online Which? survey panel for their views on broadband services in September 2004. Thanks to all the 720 broadband users who took part.

Broadband basics

SPEED

Broadband can be anything from three to 60 times faster than a dial-up internet connection. ISPs quote maximum download speeds: your service may be slower at busy times. Data transfer speed is measured in kilobits per second (one kilobit is 1,000 bits) and megabits per second (a megabit is 1,000,000 bits).

ALWAYS ON

With some broadband services, you're connected to the internet as soon as you turn on your computer. Others require you to log on. Either way, it's much quicker than dialling up.

SET COSTS

Most broadband ISPs charge a monthly fee and let you download a certain amount of data. Some providers offer unlimited use.

PHONE CALLS

Broadband lets you use your phone at the same time as surfing the net.

MULTIMEDIA

Broadband lets you do things that just aren't possible with a standard dial-up connection, such as online gaming and watching video in real time directly from the web.

(GB) a month. A limited service could save you money but, if you watch video on the net, download large files and send emails with attachments, an unlimited deal is a better option. BT estimates that one GB a month would let you surf for two hours a day, send and receive 100 emails a week, and download five music tracks a week. Some ISPs charge for exceeding the limit. PlusNet, for example, charges £1.50 for each extra GB. BT charges £4 if you go over 1GB, and £8 over 3GB.

GETTING STARTED

What equipment do I need?

You'll need a special modem (around £40), and you might have to pay for line activation (around £60) though larger ISPs tend to waive these fees in return for tying you to a 12-month contract. Most ISPs provide a free installation disc and one or two microfilters – small devices that plug into your phone points to let you receive calls and access the net at the same time. You can buy extra microfilters from around £4. Once you've run the installation disc, just plug the modem into your computer's USB port and into the phone socket via a microfilter. Don't be put off if this sounds daunting – only one in ten readers found broadband difficult to install.

Installing cable broadband might require an engineer's visit but, if you already have cable TV,

you can install broadband simply by linking your computer to your set-top box.

Can I hook up two computers to broadband?

You can use a router (with built-in modem) to link more than one computer to broadband. Routers tend to be more expensive than standard modems. Alternatively, the more technically-minded might like to try the internet connection sharing feature in Windows XP. Bear in mind that ISPs don't always offer technical support if you share your connection with more than one computer.

SECURITY

Is broadband less secure than dial-up?

Broadband is easier for hackers to exploit because you're always online. The higher speed also means you'll probably download more files, increasing your chances of opening one that contains a virus.

Is my ISP's anti-virus service enough?

No. Often these just monitor emails, so won't pick up viruses from other sources – infected CDs, say. To be completely safe, you need a firewall and anti-spyware software (see p40 for more on both).

CHANGING SUPPLIER

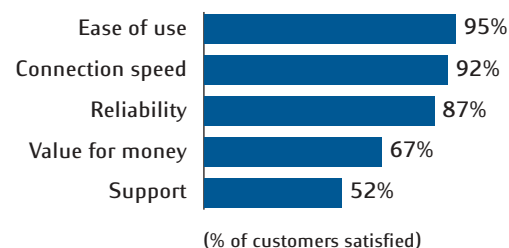
Can I switch to another broadband ISP?

Several readers told us switching is hard due to a lack of co-operation between ISPs. Things should improve thanks to a new agreement between most of the large ISPs. They will now provide a code within five days of a customer's request to leave. This code gives BT, which owns the lines, the authority to make the switch. Unfortunately, cable ISPs aren't included and many small ISPs haven't signed up. If you do switch, you'll lose any email addresses from the old ISP.

Can I keep broadband when I move house?

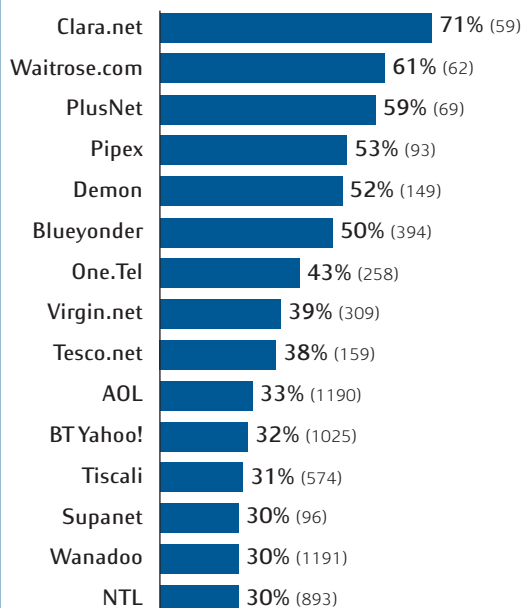
Again, this seems fraught with difficulties. ISPs don't always seem able to move your contract to a new address. Instead, you may need to take out a new contract at your new address. This sometimes means signing up for another year. The process can take a couple of weeks and you may be charged £25 to £50 for a new line to be activated.

Broadband satisfaction



The chart shows how many people were satisfied with different aspects of their broadband service. Ease of use and speed are big hits but there's room for improvement on value for money and customer service/technical support.

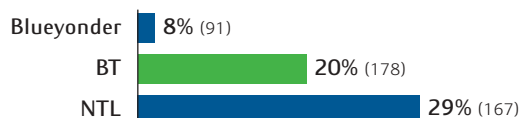
Satisfaction with ISPs



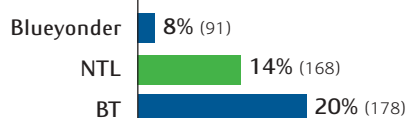
This chart shows how many people were very satisfied with their ISP (both broadband and dial-up) when we last surveyed customers (see *Which?*, June 2004, p18). The bigger ISPs – AOL, BT, NTL, Tiscali and Wanadoo – come bottom of the league. Among broadband customers, these large ISPs were more popular, with average levels of satisfaction. Four providers – Blueyonder, Demon, Pipex and PlusNet – stood out as having particularly happy broadband customers.

Dissatisfaction

SUPPORT



VALUE



(% of customers dissatisfied)

Our latest online survey measured how the three largest broadband ISPs compare. BT and NTL have some catching up to do to reach the standards set by Telewest's broadband service, Blueyonder. Just 8 per cent of Blueyonder's customers are dissatisfied with the support, compared with 29 per cent of NTL's. Similarly only 8 per cent expressed dissatisfaction with Blueyonder's value for money, compared with 20 per cent of BT's customers.

A PERFECT MATCH

To take the guesswork out of finding your ideal broadband service we've matched four 'lonely surfers' with their perfect partners. Here's our pick of almost 150 services based on price and features. For customer satisfaction, see charts, left. For the latest prices and details for all services, go to www.which.co.uk/whichextra.



A 256Kbps service, roughly five times the speed of dial-up, boosts your surfing speed and leaves your phone line unblocked when you're online.

The **AOL Silver**, **Blueyonder 256** and **Pipex Solo 250** services all cost £17.99 a month with

free equipment plus unlimited use. AOL is one of the few ISPs to offer free telephone support but, along with Blueyonder, it ties you in for a year. Pipex has a one-month minimum contract so won't tie you down. Its set-up costs are £59, and telephone support is charged at

local rate. Another bonus is that Pipex comes high up our satisfaction charts for broadband providers.

Twice the speed but cheaper is **PlusNet Lite 512k** at £14.99. The minimum contract is just one month and set-up fees come to about £100. You're limited to 1 GB usage per month – enough for sending emails and surfing. You pay only £1.50 for each additional GB. Phone support is charged at local rate and you get unlimited email addresses. PlusNet also does well in our broadband ISP satisfaction survey.

Three things are important – protecting your children from unsuitable content, giving them as much access as they need, and affordable support. **AOL**, **BT**, **Firenet**, **UK Online**, **V21** and **Wanadoo** all offer free parental controls – limiting what sites your children can access. A 512Kbps service should be quick enough for the sort of surfing needed for homework.

Firenet's Speedwire 500 unlimited service is good value at £19.99 a month, and the minimum contract length is just three months. Helpline calls are



charged at national rate, but set-up costs are steep at about £115. AOL's unlimited **AOL Gold** service costs £24 but set-up and support are free, and there are some advanced parental control features (such as regular updates of online activities). The main downside is the 12-month tie-in.

There's a good chance that your kids might want to download music files and try online gaming. Both are much improved by a faster connection. A good option could be the **AOL Platinum 1Mbps** service (offering one megabit per second access). This costs £29.99 a month.

have a stand to match it
**● OPEN-MINDED
 SURFER IN NEED OF
 A BROADBAND
 SERVICE** to take me to
 parts of the web i've
 never been before

▶ A 512Kbps service will really help when you're downloading big files, and it's fast enough to watch live 'streamed' video in real time. **PlusNet Lite 512k** (see left) is hard to beat on cost but it could be worth spending more for unlimited access.

V21 Home Broadband 512k, for example, is £17. There's a minimum one-month contract, equipment and activation cost £75, and the helpline charges £1 a minute.

At £22, **PlusNet Premier 512k** is the cheapest unlimited deal to offer local-rate phone support. Set-up costs are £100. **Demon Express Total** (£25), another unlimited 512Kbps service, offers local-rate support and free set-up.

Another unlimited 512Kbps service with no set-up costs is **Tesco Broadband** (£20). The helpline costs 50p a minute.

does not need to work
**● ADVENTUROUS
 TYPE LOOKING FOR
 FAST MOVING
 SERVICE** to keep up
 with search for the latest
 internet thrills and spills
 MAKER

▶ If you really want to make the most of all the internet can offer, including online gaming (which requires minimum delay between you and your opponents' moves), go for a speed of at least 1Mbps with a generous allowance or no limits.

Lobsterpot 1 Mbps Broadband is ludicrously cheap at £13.99 a month. You get a 20GB allowance and national-rate support calls. But this is no-frills stuff. There are no free email addresses or free web space, spam filters or anti-virus protection. Line activation is £30, and your modem costs £4.40 a month, with

a 12-month minimum contract (though you could buy your own modem instead from around £25).

Unlimited 1Mbps services start at about £23 a month with **Supanet Broadband 1Mb**. There are no set-up costs, but signing up for a year to an ISP with a £1-a-minute helpline might prove to be pricey.

For £29.95 a month, **FairBroadband** provides unlimited access with a minimum three-month contract, reasonable set-up fees of £65, and 10p-a-minute phone support.

Dial-up ISP speeds

Here are the the fastest dial-up ISPs from our speed tests (completed in December 2004). The charts show how long it took to

download a 3MB file. Best Buys must have:
 ● above average download speed
 ● at least average upload speed

● minimal dial-up errors and dropped connections
 ● at least average satisfaction rating (if featured in our survey).

Subscription

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