

Battle of the broadband

We reveal our Best Buy broadband providers and explain which type is right for you

Smaller providers are beating the broadband big boys when it comes to keeping customers happy, according to our latest survey.

Zen Internet, the winner of the 2008 Which? Award for best broadband provider, tops our satisfaction table (see p35), along with new survey entrant Be, one of few internet service providers (ISPs) in the UK offering superfast broadband (up to 24Mbps). One Which? member said: 'Having suffered with AOL for too long, I switched [to Zen] after reading Which?. It's great.'

Only Be and Zen hit Best Buy standards, but if their packages don't suit you, try the three ISPs rated as good in our survey. These are O2 – another new survey entrant – plus Utility Warehouse and Waitrose, both shortlisted for 2008 Which? Awards (see *Which?* July, p12-16).

Big brands fall behind

Some of the UK's biggest ISPs are far from being Best Buys. Seven in 10 respondents are with one of the UK's six biggest ISPs – AOL, BT, Orange, TalkTalk, Tiscali and Virgin Media. BT and the last three of these were rated as poor but AOL and Orange fared even worse.

OUR RESEARCH

In May 2008 we sent out our biggest ever ISPs survey to all 28,373 members of the Which? online panel. Our thanks to all 18,876 members who told us about their broadband services, making it the biggest broadband satisfaction survey in the UK.

Our Best Buys must score more than 80% for overall customer satisfaction and do well on other measures, like reliability and customer service.

Don't Buys

AOL and Orange are Which? Don't Buys. Scoring just 31% for overall customer satisfaction, and let down especially by customer service and support ratings, Orange is second poorest only to Bulldog with 30% (no longer available to new customers, so it's not in our table). One Which? member said of Orange: 'Customer service is non-existent. I've written long letters but received no answers. The company seems in a state of terminal confusion.'

Broadband frustrations

Poor customer service is just one of the key problems that broadband users face (see 'Your broadband bugbears', right, for more). Yet, despite frustrations, our survey suggests few of you have switched ISP in the past six months. Half of those who haven't switched in the past two years say it's because they're happy with their provider. Others reasons include not wanting to change email, worrying that something will go wrong, thinking it's a hassle, or simply reckoning it's 'better the devil you know'.

How to choose a provider

Don't be put off switching, especially if you're with a Don't Buy or poor performer – 82% of switchers in our survey found it easy. Our table, p35, will help you choose between providers for satisfaction. See www.which.co.uk/advice/switching-isp for more on how to switch.

But what if you're not even sure what 'type' of broadband to go for? Should you 'play it safe' with the best established type – ADSL, over a normal (BT) landline? Do Virgin Media's claims of reliably fast cable speeds tempt you? What about this new-fangled 'mobile broadband'? Read on for the pros and cons of each type.

YOUR BROADBAND BUGBEARS

% of broadband users who found it frustrating^a



39%

Slow/inconsistent speed



31%

Customer support issues^b



25%

Connection problems



20%

Cost of broadband



10%

Switching problems



5%

Caps or fair usage limits



21%

Other problems^c

^a 23% said they had no frustrations
^b Customer support issues include time it takes to connect, time to resolve issues, lack of knowledge, and the cost of calling ^c Problems include modem/router issues, using Voip, lack of security features, using Apple Macs, customer's ISP being taken over by another company



Best Buy lowdown



We talk to Adam Turner, head of product management at Zen Internet

Q Why do you think you won the 2008 Which? Award?

A Zen's mission is 'to provide the best ISP service in the UK'. Our customers know that their broadband will work well at all times, and trust the quality of our service.

Q How is your customer service different?

A Customers who call us aren't passed

between departments, and their enquiries will be dealt with efficiently by an experienced person.

Q You have an unusual contract model. How does it work?

A We tie our customers in to only one-month contracts, but we find they respond to our high-quality service with support and loyalty.

ADSL broadband

The UK's most widely used type

Asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL) broadband uses BT's copper-wire phone network and is available to more than 99% of UK households. All the providers in our table except Virgin Media are ADSL.

To get ADSL broadband, you must have a fixed BT phone line. However, BT is not the only choice of phone provider – line-rental providers such as the Post Office also use BT's network. Some providers, particularly local loop unbundled (LLU) companies, such as TalkTalk and Tiscali (see 'What the LLU?', below), offer discounts for getting phone and broadband together.

An exception to this is around Hull, where Kingston Communications operates the network and is the only fixed-line broadband provider.

Speeds and caps

Typically, advertised download speeds range from up to 0.5 to up to 8 megabits per second (Mbps). But the speed you'll actually get depends on many factors. Visit www.which.co.uk/broadbandspeed for more details.

After Which? raised concerns about broadband speeds last year (see *Which?*, August 2007, p40), Ofcom has announced a voluntary code of practice that will come into force in December. It requires ISPs to give an accurate estimate of a line's maximum speed. Companies must also advise potential customers that the actual speed they'll achieve may be much lower than this.

When choosing a service, also consider upload speeds, which are much slower than downloads (typically less than 0.5Mbps), as well as any caps that limit downloads or uploads. And check any equipment and the length of the contract.

Pros

- Big choice of providers and packages.
- Local loop unbundling means potential speeds are increasing and prices are dropping.
- BT plans to upgrade to fibre-optic cable. If plans go ahead, up to 10 million UK homes may have



Most families have ADSL broadband

access to services with top speeds of 100 Mbps by 2012.

Cons

- Limitations on speed.
- You must pay a fixed-phone-line rental.

Who's it for?

Anyone who has a fixed BT line and wants a wide choice of providers and packages.

WHAT THE LLU?

Local loop unbundled (LLU) is a type of ADSL where ISPs install their own equipment in BT exchanges. Although the ISPs still use BT wires, adding their own equipment enables them to offer faster/cheaper broadband. Where providers have opted for LLU, availability is limited to at most 70% of UK households, often in more populated areas.

This means there are often discrepancies between what's available from the same provider. TalkTalk, for example, offers free broadband to its phone package subscribers in LLU areas; but elsewhere, you must pay for broadband.

The process for switching between LLU providers can cause problems, as Eddie Vogg (above) discovered.

'I want to switch my Bulldog phone and broadband bundle to another provider,' said



Eddie. 'But they've all said that because my line is LLU, it no longer counts as a BT line so they can't accept me directly – I'd have to switch to BT first.'

Ofcom, the telecoms regulator, told us: 'We're working to have a seamless process for such cases by late 2008. But for now, consumers cannot switch seamlessly from a full LLU supplier. The only option is to switch phone service to a provider that offers a new line connection and then choose an ISP.'

Unless you switch to cable,

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Offering impartial, jargon-free advice, product reviews and the latest hot tips, it's the essential computing companion.

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Contacts

Be 0808 234 8570; www.bethere.co.uk

BT 0800 085 7343; www.bt.com

O2 0800 230 0202; broadband.o2.co.uk

Utility Warehouse 0844 815 7777; www.utilitywarehouse.co.uk

Virgin Media 0800 953 5353; www.virginmedia.com

Waitrose 0800 188884; www.waitrose.com

Zen Internet 01706 902000; www.zen.co.uk

Ofcom (telecoms regulator) 0300 123 3333; www.ofcom.org.uk

Otelo (dispute resolution service) 0330 440 1614; www.otelo.org.uk

Cisas (dispute resolution service) 020 7520 3827; www.cisas.org.uk

only BT and the Post Office currently offer new line connections. BT says it wouldn't charge Eddie a connection fee, but he'd be tied into a 12-month contract.

The Post Office has no contract but may charge for a new line – though it couldn't confirm the amount. Either way, we think consumers in this predicament are unfairly penalised. We hope Ofcom solves the problem swiftly.

You will need to contact individual ISPs to see if they have LLU in your area.

Mobile broadband

Surf the net on the go

Until recently, 'mobile broadband' meant surfing the internet on your mobile phone. Now, via USB adaptors that you plug into your computer – often called dongles – the same technology that offers fast internet on your mobile can provide broadband on your laptop wherever there's a 3G signal (check mobile providers' websites for coverage maps).

Maximum speeds – typically up to 3.6 or 7.2Mbps – aren't yet as fast as ADSL and have similar limitations. As a 3 spokesman put it: 'You won't get the maximum speed. Around 1 Mbp is a more realistic speed to expect.'

As mobile broadband is new, we don't yet have satisfaction ratings by provider – so they are not included in our table – but overall, mobile broadband achieves a satisfaction score of 51%, comparable to average ADSL providers.

Pros

- Surf wherever there's a 3G mobile signal – including abroad – although foreign use usually won't be included in your fee and can be extortionate.
- You don't have to pay fixed-line rental.
- Some companies offer pay-as-you-go (PAYG) mobile broadband, starting at £10 for a gigabyte (GB) (plus a dongle from £50). 1GB a month would let you surf for two hours a day, send and receive 100 emails a week, and download 30 music tracks a week.

Cons

- It's costlier than most ADSL (see table, p35) – 18 month contracts (with a free dongle) start at £15 for 3GB. You may get discounts if you have a mobile phone contract with the provider.
- Caps and fair usage limits are fairly low – typically around 3GB – and exceeding usage can be very expensive.



Mobile broadband is great for those on the move

Surf wherever there's a 3G mobile signal

Who's it for?

Mobile broadband is ideal for those who don't want to pay for a fixed line. And people who travel for work or leisure – like Which? member and caravan-owner Fran Porter (not her real name), who also has Zen Internet as her fixed-line provider – might value its flexibility as a replacement for fixed broadband or a second service.

Cable broadband

Virgin Media's alternative service can be good for bundlers

Cable, which is currently offered only by Virgin Media, provides an equivalent service to ADSL. It's available to around 50% of UK homes, mostly in urban areas. It offers a range of maximum broadband speeds from 2 to 20Mbps.

Virgin makes much of the fact that distance from the exchange doesn't affect its broadband speeds. But this doesn't mean

you'll get advertised speeds, which are still affected by equipment or traffic at peak times. The Advertising Standards Agency recently warned Virgin that it must make speed restrictions clear in adverts.

Virgin is big on bundling, and it does offer some very cheap deals to cable customers taking two or more services (broadband, home phone, digital TV and mobile). Sadly, it doesn't do all that well in our survey, and if you're not happy you'll have the hassle of switching back to BT.

Pros

- Speed isn't affected by distance from exchanges.
- At present, cable fibre quality means the potential speed is higher than ADSL. A trial has found that

up to 50Mbps is possible.

- Broadband bundles are competitively priced (£30 a month for 2Mbps, unlimited broadband, line rental with free weekend calls, and digital TV).
- It's cheaper to install a new Virgin phone line than a BT one.

Cons

- Only available to half of UK households.
- Only one choice of provider.
- Cable broadband has many of the same speed limitations as ADSL.

Who's it for?

Price-conscious consumers, particularly those who want a bundle with digital TV, phone and/or mobile. Those who live a fair distance from a BT exchange but want to achieve reasonable broadband speeds.



Bundles can offer a good deal

DIAL-UP DILEMMAS

Your options if you can't get standard broadband

Recent Ofcom figures suggest that around 12% of UK internet users still have dial-up. If you use dial-up because broadband isn't available in your area, there are a couple of alternatives. Satellite broadband is one, but it is extremely expensive.

Wireless broadband providers are more affordable. They serve small areas via radio masts, which send a broadband signal to antennae attached to houses.

Which? member Ralph Selby's community, frustrated by BT's lack of response to a campaign to provide broadband from the local exchange, commissioned one such company to provide wireless broadband in their area. Ralph says: 'The service costs more than national providers [from £23.99 a month for speeds of 0.5Mbps], but we think it's worth it.'

See www.thinkbroadband.com (FAQs) for a list of suppliers.

BEST BUY **GOOD** **OK** **POOR** **DON'T BUY**

BROADBAND ISP	PACKAGE DETAILS							WHICH? SURVEY PERFORMANCE					SCORE %
	CHEAPEST PACKAGE	MONTHLY COST (£)	DOWNLOAD	LIMIT (GB)	TIE-IN (months)	EQUIPMENT	LINE ACTIVATION (£)	EASE OF SET-UP	VALUE FOR MONEY	CONNECTION SPEED	CONNECTION RELIABILITY	CUSTOMER SERVICE	
1 ZEN INTERNET (240)	8000 Lite	17.99	8.0	5	1	N	47	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	85
= BE (48)	Value	14.00	8.0	NL	12	W	24	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	85
3 O2 (70)	Standard (LLU)	12.50 ^a	8.0	NL	12	W	free	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	79
	Access (non-LLU)	22.50 ^a	8.0	NL	12	W	free	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	79
4 WAITROSE (894)	Broadband	18.99	8.0	5	12	M	free	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	77
5 UTILITY ^b (126)	Lite	14.99	2.0	2	see ^c	N	free	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	72
6 METRONET (150)	PAYGo Option 1	11.75	8.0	0.4	1	N	40	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	64
= PLUSNET ^d (860)	Option 1	9.99	8.0	2	1	N	40	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	64
8 MADASAFISH ^e (195)	Max	14.99	8.0	5	12	W	free	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	63
= UK ONLINE (54)	Lite	14.99	2.0	NL	12	N	25	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★★	63
= CLARANET (34)	Clara Max 2GB ^f	19.99	8.0	2	12	N	58.75	★★★★★	★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	63
11 ECLIPSE (247)	Home Lite	13.95	8.0	1	18	N	47 ^g	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★★	61
12 NILDAM (104)	Lite 2Go	13.51 ^h	8.0	1 ^j	3 ^k	N	free	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	59
13 DEMON (310)	Home 8000	17.99	8.0	NL	12	M	free	★★★★	★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	57
14 SKY (647)	Base (LLU)	0 ^{m, h}	2.0	2	12	W	30	★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	54
	Connect (non-LLU)	17.00 ^h	8.0	40	12	W	30	★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	54
15 FREEDOM ⁿ (210)	Lite	13.99 ^h	8.0	10 ^p	3 ^k	N	free	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★★	53
16 TESCO (162)	Value Broadband	13.97	0.5	3	12	M	free	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	47
= VIRGIN ^q (3,895)	Size: M (cable)	18.00	2.0	NL	12	M	30	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★	47
	Plan Two ^r	17.99	8.0	NL	see ^c	W	30	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★	47
18 TALKTALK (1,321)	Talk UK Weekend (LLU)	4.99 ^s	8.0	40	18	M	30	★	★★★★★	★★	★★	★	46
	Non-LLU deal	19.99 ^s	8.0	40	18	M	30	★	★★★★★	★★	★★	★	46
19 BT (3,866)	Total Broadband ^t	15.99 ^h	8.0	10	12	R ^u	free	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	45
20 PIPEX (399)	Express	13.51 ^h	8.0	1	3 ^k	N	free	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★	43
21 TOUCAN (76)	512K Broadband	16.99	0.5	NL	12	M	free	★★	★★★★	★★	★★	★★	42
= TISCALI (1,371)	Broadband only	14.99	8.0	NL	12	W	free	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★	42
23 SUPANET (71)	Just Broadband	14.99 ^{v, h}	8.0	NL	12	M	free	★★	★★★★	★★	★★	★★	37
24 AOL (1,528)	Wireless Flexi (LLU)	14.99	8.0	10	1	W	29.99	★★	★★	★★	★	★★	36
	Non-LLU deal	19.99	8.0	10	1	W	29.99	★★	★★	★★	★	★★	36
25 KAROO ^w (57)	Lite	12.99	8.0	2	18	N	30	★★★★	★	★★	★★	★★★★	33
26 ORANGE (1,022)	Home Starter	12.00 ^{x, h}	2.0	10	18	W	free	★	★★	★★	★★	★	31

^a £5 less for O2 mobile customers ^b Utility Warehouse ^c Advertised as one-month contract, but fee is charged if cancelled within first 12 months. We see this as 12-month contract ^d Includes former Force 9 ^e Includes former Global ^f Cheaper offpeak-only package available ^g Free when switching from another ISP ^h Price includes optional landline or Voip calls ^j Unlimited between midnight and 8pm ^k Also on 12-month contract with free wireless router ^m Free broadband subject to TV subscription ⁿ Freedom to Surf ^p Unlimited between 1 and 6am ^q Virgin Media ^r Non-cable ^s Broadband available only with phone deal at £10.50 a month ^t Option 1 ^u Free online, £25 by phone ^v £9.99 when switching from another ISP ^w Only in areas covered by Kingston Communications ^x £5 for Orange mobile users with a 12- or 18-month contract

USING THE TABLE

We list the cheapest package (standalone where available) of 0.5Mbps or faster from each ISP for which we have satisfaction ratings (more than 30 responses needed). Where price is different

in LLU vs non-LLU areas we give both prices. Sample size for ISP in brackets. Go to www.which.co.uk/broadband for more details.

Package details

Monthly cost Excludes short-term

offers. **Download** The maximum advertised speed in Mbps. **Limit** Amount in GB that can be transferred per month. NL = no limit. **Tie-in** Where available, cost is for packages with a one-month contract. **Equipment** Free items:

M = modem; N = none; R = router; W = wireless router.

Score

Overall customer satisfaction Combines satisfaction and likelihood of recommendation.