

ORANGE SLOW OFF THE MARK

Anthony and Paul Webber

Paul Webber and his father use the same 'up to 8Mbps' Orange broadband package. However, they found that they were actually receiving a service of less than 1Mbps.

Paul told us: 'When we asked Orange what was wrong, it said the modem it supplied couldn't handle the maximum advertised speed and that we would have to pay to upgrade to get faster speeds. We did so but only because we felt we had no choice. I only signed up to Orange because it claimed "up to 8Mbps".'

After we spoke to Orange, it said the original modem could handle 8Mbps but it had recommended upgrading as this 'tends to provide a better-quality connection'. It has since offered the Webbers £5 off each monthly bill.

Is UK broadband up to speed?

As broadband prices fall and advertised speeds rise, we investigate whether promises of super speeds and top-notch service match up

roadband providers are advertising ever-increasing internet speeds. When we reported on broadband in August 2006, only 5 per cent of Which? members we surveyed had broadband faster than 2Mbps (see 'Jargon buster', opposite). Our latest survey suggests more than a third of you have packages offering speeds of up to 8Mbps or faster.

But faster speeds aren't making you happier. Overall, only 30 per cent of respondents to our latest survey are very satisfied with their broadband internet service provider (ISP), a 7 per cent drop since

August 2006, and big names AOL, BT and Virgin Media are all still rated below average. By contrast, smaller providers Global, Waitrose and Zen Internet have more than 70 per cent very satisfied customers. They've been Best Buys in three consecutive six-monthly surveys and were all shortlisted for our prestigious Which? Award (see Which?, July 2007, p12) for broadband, with Waitrose – which donates all ISP profits to charity - coming out on top.

We have six Don't Buys - including the 'free' broadband ISPs Orange, Sky and TalkTalk – which all failed to impress and have only around 20 per cent or less very satisfied customers. Turn to p44 to see the full results from nearly 30 of the UK's biggest broadband providers.

Not up to speed

Many ISPs now advertise broadband speeds of 8Mbps, or even faster, but in front of these speeds you'll often see two tiny but crucial words - 'up to'.

After many of you wrote to us complaining that you are getting nowhere near

In April 2007 we surveyed 14,642 Which? members online to find out how satisfied they were with their ISP and how they felt about speed and switching. In May/June 2007 we ran a speed test among more than 300 customers of 27 UK ISPs. Thanks to all who took part.

CAPPED SERVICES EXPLAINED

Capped services limit what you can download and upload. For most people, a 2GB capped service should be plenty

Only large households or people who use broadband intensively or transfer lots of large files are likely to need an unlimited service. A 2GB cap lets you do all of the following each month



Listen to online radio for three hours



10 large (50MB) programs

Send/receive 40

high-quality photos

WHICH SHOULD YOU CHOOSE?

For maximum customer satisfaction we'd always recommend our Best Buys, but the packages they offer might not suit everyone. Below we suggest broadband packages to suit different users – pick the household that sounds most like you and balance cost against satisfaction. For more advice, go to www.which.co.uk/broadband

Upwardly mobile



Busy professionals demand broadband that works at home and on the move. They also need to email lots of big attachments. If this sounds like you Cost may not be key, but you need a fast service with a high or unlimited cap and the ability to connect to

Keep it in the family

Do you have a family with teenage children all vying to get on to the shared computer or steal dad's laptop? If so, you'll probably want to manage your bank account and shop online, while the kids will be spending half their lives downloading

clips on YouTube. If this sounds like you With lots e, of users, a high or unlimited cap and decent speed are importan

broadband while travelling.

Try BT Total Broadband Option

3 (£24.99 a month after initial

discounts) - up to 8Mbps with

no cap, plus 250 Wi-Fi minutes

wireless hotspots (such as cafés

music, sharing photos on social

networking sites MySpace and

Facebook and watching video

a month, so you can surf the

internet from your laptop at

of users, a high or unlimited cap and decent speed are important. Try If you're in a cable area, try -

Virgin Media's '2 for £20' deal – up to 2Mbps unlimited broadband plus home phone line rental and free weekend calls to appease whoever gets booted off the computer. Make sure you pay bills by direct debit, though – it's £5 extra if you don't.

and stations) in the UK. Choose

wireless router with broadband

phone attached – this lets you

weekend and evening calls to UK

landlines, free over the internet.

make international calls, plus

and get a BT Home Hub – a

either a 12- or 18-month contract,



You want to upgrade from dial-up but don't plan on spending loads of time online. You need a basic broadband service to email friends, surf the web, maybe shop online or book your holidays. **If this sounds like you** If you're new to broadband, customer

service and support are crucial. You don't need high usage limits and high speeds are a bonus, not a necessity.

Try Best Buy broadband providers – Global (up to 8Mbps/5GB for £20), Waitrose (up to 8Mbps/5GB for £19) or Zen Internet (8Mbps/2GB for £18). Your usage is unlikely to exceed the 2GB or 5GB caps. Customer service is the best around and they don't charge the earth for technical support – in fact, Waitrose's support line is free from landlines.

Stark.

As time goes by

If you have lots of free time – you're retired, say – you'll have more opportunity to make the most of broadband by listening to online radio, surfing the net, and catching up online on TV programmes you've missed. If this sounds like you To watch online TV, you'll need at least up to 2Mbps or quality may be poor – up to 8Mbps is better. You'll need a high or unlimited cap and good customer service. **Try** Eclipse offers unlimited packages up to 8Mbps from £14.99 to £29.99. More expensive packages get priority for bandwidth (meaning faster speeds). Choose between a onemonth tie-in, where you pay for equipment and connection, and a 12-month one with no initial costs. Usage is monitored only between 6pm and midnight.

Jargon buster

We explain techie terminology in plain English

ADSL Asymmetric digital subscriber line – broadband via a standard phone line.

CAP/LIMIT A restriction on the amount of data you can transfer

from the internet each month.
DOWNLOAD/UPLOAD You
download data from the internet
to your computer – such as
surfing the internet or

transferring a music track from an online store to your computer. Uploading – sending an email, say – transfers data from your computer to the internet. **Kbps/Mbps** Kilobits/ megabits per second. A measure of data transfer speed. It takes 20 seconds to download a 5MB typical music track at 2Mbps. MB/GB Megabyte/gigabyte. A measure of data store. There are 1,024MB in 1GB.

LLU Local loop unbundling – where suppliers install their own equipment in BT exchanges. This enables them to offer faster speeds and lower prices.



TROUBLE WITH TALKTALK

Derek Hutchinson 75, retired

When Derek moved home, TalkTalk set up his landline service but failed to set up broadband at the same time. When he complained, it accidentally cut off his phone. TalkTalk told Derek that both services had been cancelled, so he switched to Pipex. A few months later, Derek was signed up to TalkTalk without his consent, so Pipex had to stop his service. Derek says: 'This is outrageous – I feel hijacked by TalkTalk.'

We discovered that Derek's service was not properly cancelled. TalkTalk told us: 'We apologise for any inconvenience and have compensated Mr Hutchinson.'

SWITCHING UPDATE

Have new regulations made switching easier?

For a seamless switch, your current ISP has to give you a free migration authorisation code (Mac) to pass to your new provider. In February, Ofcom introduced regulations that require ISPs to issue Macs within five days of request. The code must remain valid for 30 days – if it expires, you can request another.

Ofcom's regulations oblige ISPs on both sides of a switch to do all they can to make the switch straightforward – even if the provider doesn't use Macs, like cable and some local loop unbundled services (see 'Jargon buster', p41).

Ofcom told us that the complaints it receives about switching have decreased from 2,000 to 1,000 a month since October 2006. However, that still means that a lot of people, including Derek Hutchinson, above, are still having problems.

If you have trouble switching providers:

Go through the ISP's complaints procedure – keep a record of any letters, emails or telephone conversations

If your complaint isn't resolved after 12 weeks, ask your ISP which dispute resolution scheme it belongs to – either Otelo or Cisas – and contact it. If your dispute involves more than one ISP, raise complaints about all of them simultaneously

Let Ofcom know. It can't help with individual disputes but may take action if it receives enough complaints.

PERFECT YOUR PC KNOW-HOW

For impartial advice on products plus step-by-step guides, read *Computing Which?* – the UK's only independent computing magazine. Call 01992 822800 to try out two issues for only £3 or visit www.which.co.uk/cwtrial



advertised speeds, we decided to check what 'up to' actually means by testing the broadband speed of more than 300 people over a two-week period. The findings suggest your frustration isn't ungrounded – see 'Speed test results', below.

Customers in our trial who'd been promised speeds of up to 8Mbps achieved only 2.7Mbps on average and, for some, speeds dropped to 0.09Mbps – barely faster than dial-up (0.056Mbps). Those promised up to 2Mbps achieved a more proportionate average of 1.3Mbps, so it seems that you're more likely to know what you're getting if you sign up to a package that comes with a slower advertised speed.

To find out what speed you're receiving, and for advice on what to do if the speed you're getting is not what you expected, see 'Speed freaks', opposite.

SPEED TEST RESULTS

How actual speeds in our test matched up to ISPs' advertised speeds

We show the average, minimum and maximum speeds that people promised up to 1, 2 and 8Mbps actually achieved in our speed test.

SPEEDS ACHIEVED (Mbps)											
PROMISED SPEED	AVERAGE SPEED	MINIMUM SPEED ^a	MAXIMUM SPEED								
1 (33)	0.8	0.06	1								
2 (61)	1.3	0.04	2								
8 (178)	2.7	0.09	6.7								

Sample size in brackets. **a** Some extremely slow speeds may have been due to technical problems

What affects speed?

Speed variations have many causes. Some we can control to a certain extent. For instance, our research found that speeds are typically a bit slower between 1pm and 11pm, so you're better off downloading big files outside these times – although this doesn't help full-time workers or those who don't want to stay up late.

But other factors that might limit speeds aren't under your control. One is how far your phone line has to stretch to the telephone exchange – the shorter the distance, the faster your broadband can be. This applies only to broadband via a standard phone line (ADSL broadband) and not to cable broadband from Virgin Media. BT says ADSL broadband is available to more than 99 per cent of UK households, but it estimates that only 78 per cent of its lines can support broadband rates of up to 4Mbps or higher and only people living close to an exchange may actually be able to get speeds of up to 8Mbps.

Too many users

The second major influencing factor is the contention ratio – this is the maximum number of people sharing the same connection to the exchange as you. It's often set at 50:1 but some providers offer lower ratios, giving faster access.

Some ISPs don't use contention ratios. Eclipse (5 in the table, p44), for example, has a prioritisation system. On the surface, the only difference between its up to 8Mbps Evolution Option 1 and Home Broadband Option 1 packages, both identically priced, is that Home Broadband has a 2GB usage cap (see 'Capped services explained', p40). It seems a no-brainer to choose the uncapped service – but there's a catch. The Home Broadband package has bandwidth priority over Evolution, so Evolution customers get a slower connection when lines are overcrowded.

What needs to be done

So if ISPs know that not every customer can get faster speeds, why aren't they all clearer about it in their adverts? Thankfully, most Which? members aren't taken in by ads – when asked, only one in ten thought that a broadband service advertised as up to 8Mbps would always or usually run at 8Mbps. But only a third realised that, if our survey results are anything to go by, you'll probably rarely or never experience 8Mbps.

The Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) says that using 'up to' speeds in advertising is acceptable as long as most users are capable of getting close to that speed. It recently asked Bulldog, bottom of our table, p44, to be clear in ads for higherspeed services that top speeds can vary due to distance from the exchange.

However, even if you appreciate that 'up to' is a guide rather than a guarantee, the huge gap revealed in our speed tests between advertised and actual speeds seems unreasonable. As Which? member Ken McEwen puts it: 'If you're sold a car which you're told will do 70mph, only to find it normally goes no faster than 10mph, you have a right to be aggrieved.'

According to trading standards spokesman Richard Webb: 'When terms such as "up to" are used, it can be difficult to prove that advertisements are false or misleading. None the less, we're concerned that Which?'s findings seem to show that claimed speeds are not possible or are very unlikely to be achieved.' We'll share our full test results with trading standards officers so that they can consider whether consumers are being misled.

Which? says

We think you should be able to predict the speed you get with some certainty, or have a get-out clause if your speeds are nowhere near expected and your ISP can't help. For example, if you upgrade your service and are then tied in to a new fixed contract, you should be able to cancel that contract and be refunded any extra cash you paid as a result of being promised a faster service.

We want Ofcom to investigate advertised speeds and ensure that broadband providers aren't taking advantage of consumers by promising speeds they aren't going to get. .

Speed freaks

We answer your speed-related questions

Can I check what speed my phone line can get? If you have a non-cable phone line, go to www.adslchecker. bt.com/ pls/adsl/adslchecker. welcome – it will give you a guide to what speeds your phone line should be able to support.

How do I find out what speed I'm getting?

Try www.thinkbroadband. com/speedtest.html – results may vary by time of day and will be affected by anything else you're doing on your computer.

What should I do if the speed is much lower than expected?

Contact your ISP, as it may

DIAL-UP DECIDER

We help you choose a dial-up service provider

If you prefer, or have no choice about having, dial-up, the table shows which ISPs were best and worst for customer satisfaction in our survey.

DIAL-UP SERVICE PROVIDERS										
ISP	VERY SATISFIED RESPONDENTS (%)									
CLARANET (35)	71									
WAITROSE (55)	67									
TESCO (63)	41									
VIRGIN MEDIA (88)	38									
AOL (133)	20									
BT (146)	19									
TISCALI (122)	17									
ORANGE (162)	14									

In total we received survey responses from 1,133 dial-up customers. We've rated ISPs only where the sample size was more than 30. Sample sizes shown in brackets

be able to fix the problem. If it won't help, report it to telecoms regulator Ofcom (see 'Contacts', below).

You could sue the ISP in the small claims court for misrepresentation or for breach of contract – however, the outcome will depend on the opinion of the judge and your own particular circumstances.

For instance, if you have paid for an upgrade from 2Mbps to 8Mbps, are tied in to a contract for an additional 12 months and never get more than 2Mbps, you are likely to have a better chance of compensation than if you were upgraded free and without increasing your contract term.

Contacts

020 7492 2222

www.asa.org.uk

0800 085 7343

020 7520 3827

0845 122 4111

www.cisas.org.uk

www.eclipse.net.uk

0844 395 0603 www.globalnet.

020 7981 3040

01925 430049

Virgin Media

0845 840 7777

0800 013 2282

Zen Internet

0845 058 9000

www.zenbroad

band.com

www.waitrose.com

www.virginmedia.

www.otelo.org.uk

www.ofcom.org.uk

www.bt.com/

broadband

Cisas

Eclipse

Global

couk

Ofcom

Otelo

com

Waitrose

ASA

BT

Checklist

Look beyond price and speed when you're choosing a broadband provider

■ Unlimited Unlimited services don't have caps but usually have a fair usage policy – your ISP has to let you know about it. Exceeding this may result in warning letters, restricted speeds or a cancelled service. You'd have to try pretty hard to exceed most policies – AOL defines excessive use as downloading in a single month more than 12,000 music tracks, 30,000 high quality photos or around 60 movies, for example.

Contract length Some packages have one-month contracts. This makes it easier to change provider. Others have 12or 18-month tie-ins but are more likely to include free equipment and connection.

Freebies Don't let free equipment influence which ISP you choose. Most include only a wired modem or router. Some ISPs make you return free equipment if you later switch.

 Cancelling Want to cancel within your contract term? Some ISPs, including AOL, BT and Virgin Media cable, charge the remainder of your term – costly if you switch after only a month.
 Cost of help Many ISPs use

revenue-sharing numbers (see Which?, June 2007, p12) for technical support lines. The worst offenders shockingly use premium-rate numbers (09) – a call to Supanet, Tesco or Orange's 'free broadband' premium-rate helplines would cost 50p a minute.

■ Postcode lottery If you live in an area where ISPs can't install their own equipment in BT exchanges, you may get charged more. For example, with Sky TV or TalkTalk's bundled deals, you'll have to pay £17 and £15 extra a month respectively.

BROADBAND ISP	BROADBAND ISP PACKAGE DETAILS						WHICH? SURVEY PERFORMANCE						SCORE %	
	PACKAGE	MONTHLY COST (£)	DOWNLOAD SPEED (Mbps)	LIMIT (GB)	TIE-IN (months)	FREE EQUIPMENT	LINE ACTIVATION (£)	EASE OF SET-UP	VALUE FOR MONEY	CUSTOMER SERVICE	CONNECTION RELIABILITY	BEST BUY 2005	BEST BUY 2006	
1 GLOBAL (44)	Max Broadband	20	8	5	12	R	Free	****	****	****	****	n/a	✓	84
2 WAITROSE (336)	Broadband	19	8	5	12	М	Free	*****	****	*****	****	✓	✓	78
3 ZEN INTERNET (145)	8000 Lite	18	8	2	1	Ν	47	*****	***	****	****	1	✓	71
4 NILDRAM (89)	2gO Lite PAYG ^a	14	8	0.25	1	Ν	47	****	***	****	***	✓		52
5 ECLIPSE (186)	Evolution Option 1	15	8	NL	1	Ν	47	****	***	****	***	1		51
6 DEMON (255)	Home 8000	20	8	NL	12	М	Free	***	**	****	****			49
7 MADASAFISH (70)	Max	18	8	5	12	R	Free	****	***	****	***	n/a	n/a	49
8 TESCO (115)	Value Broadband	14	0.5	3	12	М	Free	***	***	***	****			43
9 FREEDOM2SURF (182)	Cascade Start PAYG	14	8	0.5 ^b	see ^c	Ν	Free	****	***	***	***	✓		41
10 FORCE 9 (60)	Option 1	10	8	1	1	Ν	40	****	***	***	***	✓		40
11 UTILITY WAREHOUSE (58)	Lite	15	2	2	see ^d	Ν	Free	****	****	***	***	n/a		40
12 METRONET (132)	PAYGo Option 1	12	8	5.4	1	Ν	40	***	*****	***	***	✓		34
13 PLUSNET (559)	Option 1	10	8	1	1	Ν	40	***	***	***	***	✓		33
14 PIPEX (421)	Mini	15	8	2	12	М	Free	****	**	***	***			32
15 TOUCAN (44)	512Kb Broadband	17	0.5	NL	12	М	Free	***	****	***	***	n/a		32
16 UK ONLINE (44)	1Mb Broadband	20 e	1	NL	12	Ν	25	**	****	***	**	n/a		30
17 BT (2,921)	Total Option 1 ^a	18	8	5	12	R	Free	**	*	***	***			28
18 HOMECALL (40)	Up to 8 Mbps ^f	7	8	NL	12	М	Free	**	***	***	**	n/a		28
19 VIRGIN MEDIA (2,706)	(Cable) Size M	18	2	NL	12	М	25	**	**	***	***			27
20 VIRGIN MEDIA (2,706)	Talk Bundle 2 ^a	15	8	NL	see ^d	М	Free	**	**	***	***			27
21 SUPANET (50)	Silver ^a	12 ^g	8	NL	12	М	N/A	**	***	**	**			26
22 TISCALI (914)	Broadband ^a	13	1	NL	12	М	Free	***	***	**	**			24
23 SKY (198)	Connect ^h	17	8	40	12	WR	40	**	****	**	**	n/a	n/a	21
24 TALKTALK (503)	Talk2 International ^j	15	8	40	18	Ν	Free	*	****	*	**	n/a		21
25 AOL (1,295)	Silver	20 ^k	2	NL	12	WR	Free	***	*	***	**			20
26 ORANGE (968)	Starter	15 ^m	2	2	12	М	Free	**	*	**	**			18
27 KAROO INTERNET (36)	Max Option 1 ⁿ	17	8	NL	12	R	Free	***	*	***	***			17
28 BULLDOG (49)	Anytime ^p	10	8	1	12	М	Free	***	***	**	***			12

a Price includes some free voice over internet protocol (VoIP, making phone calls over the internet) or home phone calls **b** Unlimited between 1am and 6am **c** Advertised as one-month contract but £50 is charged if you cancel within six months – we regard this as a six-month contract **d** Advertised as one-month contract but fee is charged if you cancel within the first 12 months – we regard this as a 12-month contract **e** £9.99 a month for customers **u** Price for new connections. £7.99 for migrations **h** Sky broadband available only to Homecall landline customers **g** Price for new connections. £7.99 for migrations **h** Sky broadband is available only to Sky TV customers on a minimum contract of £15 a month. Sky also offers 'free' or cheap broadband service at no monthly cost **k** £15 in LUL-enabled areas **j** Available only with £5.89 a month TalkInternational call plan. Customers in enabled areas **w** oalso subscribe to TalkTalk line rental (£10.50 a month) receive this broadband service at no monthly cost **k** £15 in LUL-enabled areas **m** Standalone service. Orange also offers free or very cheap broadband with a mobile contract for £30 or more **n** Available only in parts of East Yorkshire covered by Kingston Communications **p** Available only so home phone customers

USING THE TABLE

We list the cheapest package of 0.5Mbps or faster from each ISP for which we have satisfaction ratings. Best Buys have more than 70 per cent very satisfied customers. Number of customers surveyed for each ISP in brackets.

Go to www.which.co.uk/

broadband for a full list of packages available.

Package details

Monthly cost To the nearest £. Excludes short-term offers. Download speed The maximum advertised download speed. Limit Amount in GB that can be downloaded or uploaded per month. NL = no limit. Tie-in Where available, cost is for packages with a one-month contract. Free equipment M = modem; N = none; R = router; WR = wireless router.

Survey performance

Best Buy 2005/2006 A tick means an ISP was a Best Buy in a previous survey; n/a that the sample size was insufficient.

Score

Percentage of customers who are very satisfied with their service.