Choose an ISP

Broadband might be the focus of all the hype, but it's far from the only way to get online. Even if it's available, what's likely to suit your surfing needs doesn't necessarily depend on BT upgrading your local telephone exchange. Emma Stroud presents an overview of internet access in the UK and the services on offer

A s broadband sweeps across the country, providing us with fast, rich internet content, there's never been a better time to get online. Once the province of a privileged few, broadband is now available to the majority of people in the UK, giving us the chance to explore the internet without the irritation of slow downloads.

That means we can all start enjoying online radio and streamed real-time video broadcasts and, after a hard day's video-conferencing online with peers and colleagues across the globe, sit down to watch films or TV programmes we have downloaded to our home PCs during the day.

Broadband makes these things possible because of its superior speed, but it isn't about to replace other forms of online access. Competition from broadband services has also meant that prices for conventional dialup internet access have become cheaper, so it's good news all round for the consumer.

If you're about to take your first tentative online steps and start exploring the wonders of the internet, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the array of packages out there. Over the last decade the number of ISPs (internet service providers) has multiplied, providing a great deal of choice over who gets our business as well as a host of access methods – dialup or broadband cable, ADSL (asymmetric digital

subscriber line) or satellite – to understand and choose between. This guide will help you decide which ISP and which type of access is right for you.

Supermarket sweep

Every Tom, Dick and Harry seems to own an ISP these days – telcos, media organisations and even several supermarkets are all competing to hook you up to the web. This makes choosing between providers a complicated decision.

To make things worse, there's now a variety of ways of connecting to the internet. At a basic level you can choose between dialup access (where your PC has to make a phone call each time you want to connect to the internet) and a faster broadband connection which is always online and can wave goodbye to long periods of thumb-twiddling while your modem makes yet another attempt to establish a connection. If you opt for broadband there's the further choice of ADSL, cable or satellite. So just how do you know which will be the best option?

Firstly, consider the way you intend to use the internet. Who is going to use it, when they will use it and for how how many hours at a time? All these factors will affect the kind of connection you need. If you want to send and receive emails and do the odd bit of surfing, you may not

need the fastest, most expensive connection. But if you're a frequent web surfer and are likely to want to send emails containing large amounts of data, broadband might be a better bet. You may already have a dialup connection and want to upgrade to broadband or simply find a more reliable ISP.

Before you make your decision shop around and have a look at what's available. Standard fare from an ISP is a dialup connection. This literally means that your computer will dial a local number to connect to the internet. There are four ways of paying for this service – pay-as-you-go, flat rate, off-peak and a subscription model.

With the pay-as-you-go connection you'll pay the cost of a local telephone call to be connected – typically four pence per minute peak and just over a penny a minute off-peak. If the amount of time you spend on the internet is minimal, then a pay-as-you-go option might suit.

Heavy traffic

For heavier users there's the flat-rate model. This means you pay a set monthly fee to use the internet as much as you like. With the advent of broadband, flat-rate dialup prices have been pushed down and there are now some good deals around. Expect to pay anywhere between £10 and £20 pounds a month.

You should be aware of what you are getting, however: in the past some ISPs have cut users off when too many are connected at once and some ISPs will limit what you can download. When things go wrong you'll also need to make sure that your chosen ISP makes it priority to get your connection up and running again.

In the last year or so, some ISPs have started to offer an off-peak service whereby, for a certain amount per month – usually between £5 and £10 – you can use the internet as much as you like during off-peak times (evenings and weekends).

At all other times you'll usually pay local rates but it's a good idea to check exactly how much you'll be paying for peak period usage as it varies from ISP to ISP. Many of these packages work in association with BT SurfTime which means that you pay a monthly charge to both BT and your ISP, although some ISPs have now developed independent offerings.

You should also check exactly what an ISP classifies as off-peak. Some have a set number of off-peak hours per evening – between 5pm to 10pm, for example – while others choose 6pm to 8pm. Freeserve has a good weekend deal letting you use the internet all night from 6pm to 8am. This could be particularly good value if you're planning to stay up late into the night playing online games.

AOL offers two different subscription services for light users, both of which consist of paying a monthly fee and call charges for use of the internet at any time. The Off Peak All the Time service gives you between seven and 10 hours internet access for £10.99 plus call charges of 1p a minute.

For those who keep internet usage to a bare minimum, the Light User service gives you seven hours or under for £5.95 monthly plus call charges of 3.9p. Neither of these packages is a bad deal, particularly as subscribers have full access to AOL's extensive website content and free technical help.

Coppers and robbers

If you don't mind paying a bit extra in return for faster, more reliable access, consider broadband. Data travels to your PC at a far more respectable 512K (though uploading information is still restricted to 56K), faster still if you choose a business subscription.

This always-on type of service provides an almost instant web connection, dispenses with the rigmarole of dialling up and strips down the amount of time you'll spend waiting for web pages to appear. Your PC's modem shares the phone line with your telephone so you can surf the internet and make calls at the same time, too. But before you seek out the cheapest broadband

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connection, you need to check its availability and which of the several flavours may suit (or be available to) you.

By now, you'll probably have heard rumours about broadband: it's been delayed again, it's being held up by BT, or even it's been deliberately held up by BT so it can make more money. Whatever the truth, the ADSL version is now available in a significant proportion of the UK, though subscription levels are still only around half that for cable-based broadband.

Over the hills and far away

BT owns (almost) all phone lines in the UK, including the local loop – the copper wire that connects your home or business phone to the local exchange. So when you log on at your PC, data first arrives at the exchange then it passes over BT's wider network before being transferred by your ISP to the internet.

Because of this, service providers are dependent on BT upgrading individual exchanges to support ADSL technology before they can start offering broadband services. Local loop unbundling means that, in theory, other licensed companies could participate in the process of upgrading local exchanges to support ADSL technology by installing their own equipment in or next to BT's exchanges.

In practice, ISPs have found it's not financially viable to do this and have been waiting for BT to upgrade phone exchanges so they can rent the technology from them and sell it on to their customers. This is a long and drawn-out process which BT say is now 66 percent complete.

Another glitch is location: if you live more than 3.5km from the local exchange you won't be able to get ADSL broadband because, after this point, the quality of the connection will plummet. To find out whether you can get ADSL in your area BT has an availability checker, which can be found at www.bt.com/broadband. Type your postcode into the checker and the gods of broadband will inform you whether you're one of the chosen ones.

Unfortunately if you live in a rural area, it's likely to be bad news. It doesn't make sense economically, says BT, to upgrade local exchanges which struggle to show enough demand. However, BT has recently launched a scheme which will give its customers more influence on ADSL broadband rollout. You can register your interest in broadband at any ADSL service provider's website. If enough people in your area have registered (200-500 people) BT will upgrade your local exchange. You can monitor how close your exchange is to qualifying on BT's website.

Cable enable

ADSL's main competitor is cable. Though cable has been extremely successful in the US and parts of Europe, where the

majority of people have cable TV, in this country, cable companies have faced financial difficulties. However, they generally offer some good deals and now have over 250,000 subscribers. If you are thinking about getting digital TV now or in the future, cable could therefore be a sound investment. However, even if you live in an area served by cable TV, it doesn't necessarily mean that cable broadband is available. Cable companies also have to upgrade their systems to make way for broadband. Check whether cable is available in your area on your chosen ISP's website.

ADSL has some advantages over cable, one of which is that you share your connection from the ISP to the internet with a limited number of users, so the contention ratio is low. In the UK, most ADSL services are contended at a ratio of 50:1 for home or basic business use and 20:1 for business so speeds of connection aren't limited by the amount of users in the area. A cable ISP enables up to 1,000 users to connect to the internet. But if all those users are online at the same time, the quality of the connection will suffer.

Stay static

Most ISPs, ADSL or cable, now offer some sort of free web space for their users and if this is something you are interested in you may be wise to opt for ADSL rather

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than cable. With an ADSL connection you can get a static IP (internet protocol) address that will enable you to set up and maintain your own website. However, a static IP address is also a prerequisite for running servers which form an essential component of business networks. Cable users only have access to a temporary IP address that remains live only for the time that you are connected to the internet.

If you subscribe to digital cable TV you might already have a cable modem built into your set-top box; otherwise you will have to pay for it. Depending on the service provider this will be included with the leasing cost, built into the monthly charge or bundled into the installation cost. Purchasing a modem outright might seem expensive but your monthly bill may be cheaper as a result.

Start beaming

Another option open to business users is satellite. Currently, it's rather more expensive than its rivals but if you run a business that's based in an area not currently served by ADSL or cable and are desperate for a faster web connection, it's certainly worth investigating as it has the potential to provide very fast downloads.

Satellite internet access works in a similar way to satellite television. A collection point obtains the signal sent from your modem and beams it up to a satellite above the Earth. This, in turn, sends down the page to the receiving dish at your house/office. The process is fast but there is a degree of latency between clicking on a link and getting the page back. The latency shouldn't normally cause you any problems as satellite speeds are fast. However, if you want to play games online you may notice a slight difference in quality.

There are currently only a few companies in the UK that offer

Types of internet access

- **Dialup** The first widely available means of connecting to the internet in which your computer dials a local number to connect to the web. It's now available in a range of different packages including pay-as-you-go, flat-rate, off-peak and subscription-based services.
- **Broadband** A 'fat pipe' which allows large amounts of data to be transported very quickly, allowing you to see internet pages almost instantaneously. Broadband services are tailored to suit both consumers and businesses. Business packages are the most expensive but deliver faster access and more extras – for example, a greater amount of free web space and a larger number of email addresses.
- **ADSL** (asymmetric digital subscriber line) The most common form of broadband which uses telephone lines to carry digital information. The service is limited by the number of telephone exchanges that have been configured to deliver it and by the distance of the customer to the exchange.
- **Cable** An underground cable network delivers cable to your computer. The network needs to be configured for broadband in the same way as ADSL but it's generally available in those areas that have access to cable TV.
- **Satellite** Satellite services are usually targeted at customers in rural areas (those who don't have access to ADSL or cable). Prices are high but satellite delivers a high-speed service.
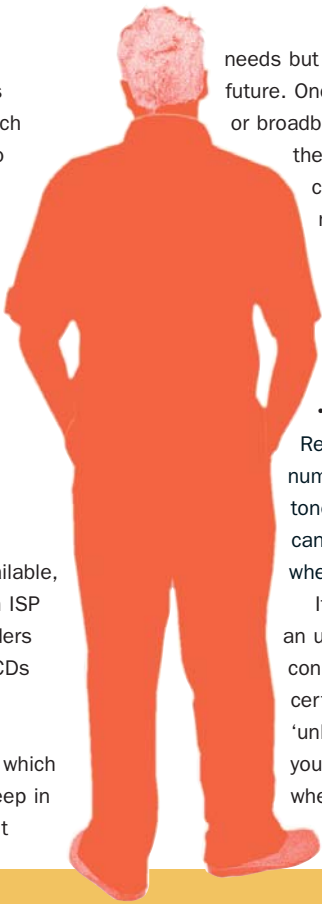
satellite broadband access. Aramiska has launched a satellite broadband service for SMEs that will support up to 30 users. Prices start at £99 a month.

BTopenworld has also just launched its offering for businesses which, at the most basic level, offers single-user access to the internet for £59.99 per month. Add to this the cost of the equipment you need to set up, including the purchase of the satellite dish and indoor broadband unit and installation, and you're looking at anywhere from about £900 upwards. This may seem vastly expensive when compared to ADSL and cable but, as satellite technology develops, prices are likely to drop significantly.

Wireless broadband is a type of fast internet technology that has yet to fully spread its wings. Wireless operates by means of a fixed antenna and modem to beam a signal to and from base points and beyond to the internet. The technology's best hope was Tele2, which unfortunately has run into financial difficulty and is now unable to take on any more customers. However, wireless access may not be ready to be written off just yet – BT is currently operating a wireless trial in Wales.

What questions should I ask my ISP?

Now you know what's available, you will need to select an ISP from the numerous providers out there thrusting their CDs and promotional material through your letterbox.

When you're choosing which service you would like, keep in mind not just your present needs but what you will require in the future. Once you've plumped for dialup or broadband, doing some research on the credibility of the ISPs you're considering will help you narrow down the pack. These questions are intended to give you some idea of what to think about when selecting your ISP.

• How reliable is the connection? Reliability should be your number one priority. Engaged tones and unavailable servers can become very frustrating when you need to get online.

If you are looking at getting an unlimited-use dialup web connection be warned that certain ISPs use the term 'unlimited' loosely. Some turf you offline after a few hours when all their available modem slots fill up while others have trouble dealing with large email attachments and will give up on them after a certain period.

By simply asking current users of your chosen ISP what problems they have experienced you'll learn a lot about the company. See www.ispreview.co.uk for comments on ISPs from other users.
• What is the ratio of subscribers to modems (access ports) for dialup connections? Each time you dial in, your call is answered by the equivalent of a modem. The more modems an ISP has, the better your chances getting online quickly.
• What are the service arrangements and how reliable are they? If things go wrong you could find yourself hanging on the end of a phone, so have a look at the ISP's support arrangements. It's a good idea to call your ISP's technical support line and find out exactly how long it takes to get through. Do you get a busy signal or are you put on hold? If you find yourself waiting for an unreasonable amount of time, you may want to take your custom elsewhere. What are the support hours? Does tech support operate at evenings and weekends and how much will you be charged per minute for it?
• Will a home user package meet my business internet connection needs? If you are running a business, choose a business package rather than a home or consumer one as it should let you connect several PCs and have some sort of service level agreement setting out a maximum amount of downtime and guaranteed minimum connection speed. Though business packages are pricier than consumer subscriptions, a cast-iron guarantee of internet access 99 percent of the time can be commercially invaluable.

Generally speaking, the quality of the support depends on how much you pay for your service. However, you may well find that some of the smaller ISPs make up what they lack in size in terms of quality customer service.
• How safe is the internet service provided? ISPs will not normally provide security themselves but good service providers advise you what sort of security you should take to protect yourself against hackers and other threats while online.
• What is the ISP's privacy policy? If you don't want to end up the recipient of hundreds of very irritating spam messages, make sure you check the ISP's privacy policy. Some ISPs will sell your personal information to commercial agencies which are prepared to pay high prices for it. Make sure your ISP doesn't do this without your express permission.

What other services does the ISP offer?

Most ISPs provide free web space in which to create and host your own website. If you want to set up a website, check how much web space ISPs offer you. Find out how much is necessary for what you want to do on the web and how much will be made available to you. Small businesses, in particular, should think about the growth of their web presence and decide whether the ISP will be able to support it.

Service providers will usually offer from between 5MB to unlimited space; 10MB should be sufficient for most personal sites, but if you are keen on using lots of audiovisual effects you may need more.

Look for clear instructions on how to set up your web page. What will your web address look like if you have one? You don't want it to be long and complicated. The advantage of having your own domain name is that you can choose something simple. Some ISPs will offer you multiple email addresses that may be useful if you need separate email addresses for each member of the family or if you're running a business.

If you plan to play online games, check your ISP can accommodate you. If you have a family or work with children, find out about the filtering service offered by the ISP to block access to inappropriate material.

Many larger ISPs offer their members content such as news headlines, stock quotes, weather information chatrooms and newsgroups. AOL also offers its customers services like use of a personal calendar, a facility where you can post photos online and a shared calendar so that groups of people can co-ordinate their diaries.

Finally, always look out for additional costs on top of connection fees. Are you charged extra for additional email addresses, web space or peak usage? ■

ISPs compared

DIALUP FLAT-RATE

Name	Website	Telephone	Monthly charges	Off-peak service	Technical support hours	Technical support charges	Free web space provided	Number of email addresses
AOL	www.aol.com	020 7348 8093	£15.99	£10.99 and call charges 1p/min	8am-midnight	free	20MB per screen name	7
Blue Yonder (cable)	www.telewest.co.uk	0800 953 5383	£12.00	n/a	24hr	50p per minute	30MB	15
BTopenworld	www.btopenworld.com	0870 241 5568	£15.99	£6.99	8am-12 midnight	50p per minute	50MB	10
Clara.net	www.clara.net	020 7903 3310	£14.99	£4.99 for 12hrs	24hr	local rates	50MB	5
Demon	www.demon.net	0800 027 0582	£11.75 plus phone charges	£11.75 plus BT Surftime charges	24hr	free	20MB	unlimited
Freeserve	www.freeserve.com	0870 872 0099	£13.99	£5.99 plus BT Surftime charges	24hr	50p per minute	30MB	unlimited
One Tel	www.onetel.co.uk	0800 957 0700	£12.99	n/a	8am-10:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5.30pm weekend	50p per minute	10MB	3
NTL	www.ntl.com	020 7908 6488	£10.00	n/a	24hr	£1 per minute	10MB	5
Supanet	www.supanet.com	0800 915 8181	£15.99	£4.99 and call charges 1p/min	9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm weekend	50p per minute	20MB	5
Tiscali	www.tiscali.co.uk	0906 300 6633	£14.99	£11.99	8am-12 midnight Mon-Sun	50p per minute	10MB per email address	6

BROADBAND

Name	Website	Telephone	Installation	Monthly charges	Free web space provided	Number of email addresses	Phone support hours (Mon-Sun)	Phone support charges
AOL	www.aol.com	020 7348 8093	£85 for modem pack	£34.99	20MB per screen name	7	8am-midnight	free
Blue Yonder (cable)	www.telewest.co.uk	0800 953 5383	£50	£29.99	30MB	15	24hr	free
Breathe	www.breathepro.com	no number given	self-install £65	£25.99	25MB	25	24hr	local rates
BTopenworld	www.btopenworld.com	0845 601 5190	free connection until 31 August; after that £65 plus £85 equipment charge	£29.99	20MB	10	8am-12 midnight	50p per minute
Clara.net	www.clara.net	020 7903 3310	self-install £50	£29.99	50MB	5	24hr	local rates
Demon	www.demon.net	0800 957 0700	self-install £50	£24.99	20MB	unlimited	24hr	free
Freeserve	www.freeserve.com	0800 872 0099	free connection but £84.99 for broadband modem	£29.99	30MB	unlimited	24hr	national rates
One Tel	www.onetel.co.uk	0800 957 0700	self-install £60	£27.99	n/a	1	8am-11pm	50p per minute
NTL (cable)	www.ntl.com	020 7908 6488	£75, £50 existing customers	£24.99	10MB	5	24hr	local rates