

Broadband – a consumer guide

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What is Ofcom?

The Office of Telecommunications – Ofcom – is the independent regulator for the UK telecommunications industry. Ofcom wants to see quality, choice and value for money for everyone using broadband Internet access in the UK. This guide will help you take advantage of the wide choice of service providers and broadband Internet packages that are available.

Who should read this guide?

- ✓ You're thinking about getting Internet access at home, have heard about broadband and would like more information about what's on offer.
- ✓ You've got a standard dial-up (narrowband) Internet connection at home and are thinking about upgrading to broadband, but you're not sure what the benefits are or what choices are available to you.
- ✓ You've got broadband at home and are thinking about switching service provider but are not sure what your options are.

This guide is targeted at home users. For information about how broadband could benefit your business, visit www.ukonlineforbusiness.gov.uk and/or www.telecomsAdvice.org.uk.

What is broadband?

Broadband is always-on, high speed Internet access. There are different ways of accessing the Internet using a broadband connection. Most people use a connection via their existing telephone or cable line. However, broadband is also available using other technologies including radio, satellite and powerlines.

What does broadband offer?

Broadband differs from standard dial-up (narrowband) Internet access in several ways:

- **Broadband offers faster access to the Internet**

Broadband is a faster way of connecting your computer to the Internet – often around ten times faster than a narrowband connection.

This is because broadband provides greater capacity to receive data than a dial-up connection. It allows you to view web pages more quickly, download large amounts of information more easily (eg film trailers) and use services that require streaming of content (eg Internet radio), that do not work as well with a dial-up connection.

The table below shows the range of maximum speeds different types of connection offer, based on services currently available to residential and business end users in the UK. Speed is measured in kilobits per second (kbps or kbit/s) and megabits per second (mbps or mbit/s). In most cases, higher speed services attract higher monthly rental fees.

Type of connection	Speed (max.)
Dial-up (narrowband)	64 kbps
ISDN (Integrated Services Digital Network)	128 kbps
Midband	128 kbps
Broadband	150 kbps
	256 kbps
	512 kbps
	600 kbps
	1 mbps
	2 mbps
	3 mbps
	4 mpbs
...and higher	

- **Broadband is 'always on'**

Broadband services are 'always-on'. This means there's no need to dial up to the Internet or log off once you've finished surfing. So your e-mails appear immediately without having to log on first.

- **Broadband is unmetered**

Most broadband services are unmetered so you pay a flat fee each month with no additional charges for the amount of time you spend online.

However unmetered does not necessarily mean unlimited. To ensure that capacity is shared fairly between users, some service providers limit the number of hours you can spend online (eg x hours a month) or the amount of data you can download (eg 1 gigabit per day). In most cases, these limits are unlikely to affect the average user. However, unlimited services are widely available so if you are a heavy user, check with your ISP what restrictions apply before signing up.

- **With broadband, you can surf the Internet and use the telephone at the same time**

Most types of broadband access split your telephone into two channels. This means the Internet doesn't tie up your phone line and you can talk and surf at the same time, without the need for a second telephone line.

What do I need to get broadband access at home?

- **You need a personal computer or a similar Internet device**

Most people use a personal computer (PC) to access the Internet. ISPs will be able to tell you what minimum computer specifications are needed to use their broadband service.

A PC should give access to the whole of the Internet and the majority of web sites are designed for access using PCs. However, a number of other devices also offer Internet access, for example 3G mobile phones, palmtop computers and digital television boxes.

- **You need a broadband modem**

A modem is a device that enables computers to transmit data across networks and speak to each other. New computers generally come with modems, which are adequate for standard dial-up (narrowband) Internet access.

Broadband requires a modem capable of higher speeds. Most broadband service providers include a broadband modem in their initial set-up package. However, you can choose to buy your broadband modem from elsewhere eg an independent computer dealer, but check with your ISP first to find out what's compatible.

- **You need to be connected to the network e.g. by telephone, cable, radio or satellite**

There are different types of broadband connection. The majority of broadband users in the UK use a connection that involves upgrading their existing phone line – known as a DSL (Digital Subscriber Line) or cable modem connection.

DSL is the technology that BT has decided to use to offer broadband via its network. And cable modems are the broadband connection offered by the cable companies.

Broadband is also available using wireless (radio) and satellite technology. This is likely to require the installation of a small antenna or satellite dish at your home.

It is important to note that broadband access for some homeowners may be limited. For information about what types of broadband connection are available in your local area, see below.

- **You need an Internet service provider (ISP)**

In the same way that companies supply you with gas and electricity services, an ISP is a company that supplies you with access to the Internet. ISPs offer a variety of broadband packages that can include services like e-mail, web space and exclusive content, as well as high-speed Internet access.

If you are in an ADSL-enabled exchange area (see below) and have a BT phone line, you will have a wide choice of ISPs and may be able to use a cable company too. However if you choose to connect via cable, your choice of ISP may be limited.

There are many independent websites that can tell you more about what service providers are offering. For information about ADSL, try www.adslguide.org.uk. And for a list of DSL, cable, radio and satellite broadband service providers, consumer reviews and news, try www.ispreview.co.uk. Alternatively, try searching for terms such as 'broadband advice' and 'consumer broadband guide'.

How can I find out if broadband is available in my area?

- **ADSL**

ADSL is currently available to 71 per cent of UK homes and businesses. Where ADSL is available, there is a choice of over 100 ISPs to choose from. ADSL services are currently available for around £20-£30 a month and there may be a charge for installation.

It is important to note that even within an ADSL-enabled area, around six per cent of people are currently unable to get ADSL services because they live too far away from their exchange. BT Wholesale is currently testing the provision of ADSL services over slightly greater distances from the exchange than at present and hopes to reduce this number to three per cent. The fact that some people in an ADSL-enabled area still won't be able to get ADSL is because of limitations of the technology.

You can find information about the availability of ADSL services by using the phone number and postcode checkers on BT's broadband website www.bt.com/broadband. These checkers can tell you whether your phone line is in an enabled exchange area and what services are on offer.

Consumers who live in areas where an exchange has not been enabled can express interest in receiving ADSL by registering their demand with an ISP. A directory of broadband ISPs can be found at www.bt.com/broadband. BT has

established trigger levels for customer interest at many of its exchanges. When registrations reach a pre-set trigger level, BT will start the process for the exchange to be enabled. If demand at any exchange without a pre-set trigger level reaches 150, BT will re-survey the exchange to identify whether a trigger level can be set.

- **Cable modem**

To receive broadband via cable you need to live in a location serviced by one of the cable providers.

Cable networks cover 50 per cent of households. The majority of cable networks, but not all, have been upgraded to broadband. Cable modem services are currently available for around £25-£30 a month and there may be a charge for installation.

The postcode checkers on NTL's and Telewest's web sites can tell you whether you live within a cabled area. See www.ntl.co.uk and www.telewest.co.uk.

- **Wireless**

Broadband services are also available over wireless networks, often via an aerial fixed to the roof of your house or premises. Prices vary but are often similar to ADSL and cable modems.

Broadband fixed wireless access (BFWA) is currently available to around 12 per cent of UK homes and businesses. At present, BFWA services are targeted primarily at businesses.

At a regional level, a growing number of groups are developing community wireless networks in areas where ADSL and cable modems are not available. These services are being used by both residential and business users. To find out if there is a community wireless network in your area, take a look at Annex 2 of the Guide to Wireless Broadband, published by the Government's Broadband Taskforce

http://www.broadband.gov.uk/html/ukbroadband_task_force/publications.html.

- **Satellite**

Broadband satellite access is available across the whole of the UK.

There are two main forms of broadband satellite access available in the UK – one-way and two-way. One-way satellite provides a fast download speed, using the PSTN as the return path. This type of connection is good for downloading large files – such as music or videos – as well as every-day surfing, but not so good for sending large amounts of information. Two-way satellite broadband provides a fast link in both directions – enabling you to use more interactive applications.

One-way satellite prices vary but are available from around £15 a month. Two way satellite costs are generally higher than other types of broadband connections.

Installation costs for one and two way satellite services are also likely to be higher than other types of broadband connections. However, grants are available in certain areas to help small businesses choosing satellite where ADSL and cable modem access is not available. Ask your Regional Development Agency for information or visit www.rabbit-broadband.org.uk.

For a full list of satellite and wireless service providers, visit <http://www.rabbit-broadband.org.uk/solutions/supplier-list.asp>.

What should I consider when choosing my broadband connection and ISP?

The key things to consider are:

- What type of broadband access is available in your area?
- How much are you willing to pay? Consider the monthly rental fee and one-off installation charge.
- How fast do you want your access to be? Twice as fast as your dial-up connection or ten times as fast?
- What level of customer support does the ISP offer? Does it offer online advice and is there a charge for phoning the helpdesk?
- What length is the minimum contract?
- What is included in the service e.g. parental controls, security software ('firewalls'), web space and e-mail addresses?

Can I change my broadband ISP if I'm not happy?

Yes. But check your contract first – it may tie you in for a certain number of months. And before moving to a new ISP, consider whether the new ISP can support your current e-mail address and take over provision of any web space you have.

If you are switching from one ADSL ISP to another ADSL ISP, you must contact the ISP you wish to switch or 'migrate' to. The new ISP will then contact BT Wholesale and request that your broadband service be migrated to it from your old ISP. BT Wholesale will let your old ISP know that you wish to migrate and will give it ten working days to agree to the transfer. If the old ISP agrees, then the migration takes place and the new ISP is charged £35 by BT for the work – it is a commercial decision for the new ISP as to whether it passes this charge on to you. If you are refused transfer, you should discuss this issue with your old ISP.

If you have an ISDN or Home/Business Highway line then you can convert to ADSL. To do this means changing the line to an ordinary analogue line first. However there is no guarantee that you will be able to get an ADSL connection -

try entering your postcode into BT's availability checker first
www.bt.com/broadband.

Who do I contact if I have a problem with my broadband service?

If you are unhappy with the service you are getting, your first contact should be your ISP. It is helpful to keep a proper record of your complaint, listing:

- the date and time you spoke to your ISP;
- who you spoke to; and
- what they said or promised to do.

If, after this, you feel you have been dealt with poorly or in an unreasonable way, you can check to see if your ISP has a high-level complaints review team (a team that will look again at customer complaints that cannot be sorted out at the first attempt), and ask that the matter is reviewed. If you are still dissatisfied, you can contact Ofcom for advice. However, in most cases Ofcom cannot resolve the complaint with your ISP for you.

If you are still not happy with your ISP, try voting with your feet and switching to a new ISP (but check your terms and conditions first, see above).

Disclaimer

The information contained is for general guidance only. We do everything possible to check that the information is accurate and up to date at the time of publication. However, we cannot guarantee any of the information. Ofcom is not responsible for content produced by any other organisation mentioned in this guide. You may want to take independent advice on legal matters. The contents of this guide should not be seen as endorsing the products or services of any company. For training purposes, we may monitor calls you make to us.

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Feedback

Q1. How useful did you find Ofcom's guide to broadband?

- Very useful
 - Fairly useful
 - Not very useful
 - Not at all useful
-

Q2. Do you have access to the Internet at home?

- Yes, broadband
- Yes, but not broadband
- No

Q3. As a result of looking at Oftel's guide to broadband, which of the following statements apply to you?

- I will consider getting broadband Internet access
The guide confirmed that broadband is not for me
- I will consider switching my Internet service supplier (ISP).
- I will advise somebody else about their Internet service
- I will tell somebody else about Oftel's broadband guide
- Unlikely to take any action
- Do something else (please specify below)

Q4. Is there anything else you would have liked to have found out about broadband that the guide didn't include?

Q5. All of your comments are of interest to us. If you have any other comments you would like to make about Oftel's broadband guide please enter them in the text box below.

Thank you
