

Responding to the SMEs Call for Inputs

Representing:

Organisation

Question 1: What are the communications needs of SMEs and how may these differ by: business size, sector and business model, location, other relevant factors?:

Most business rely on email, more so than phones for some companies and as more services, such as banking, bill payment, ordering from suppliers, etc. move online a reliable internet connection is vital

For companies selling products having sales and marketing information online helps keep their customers up-to-date with products.

Question 2: How do the needs of SMEs for communications services differ from (a) residential consumers and (b) large enterprises?:

SME's require a reliable connection with a guaranteed fix period should there be problems. Contention rates should be lower than for residential consumers as well. Most SME's don't have the budget for expensive connections like leased lines and EFM unlike larger organisations.

Question 3: What are the types and degree of network availability issues that affect SMEs, for example issues with specific locations or services and what is the effect of these issues on SMEs? businesses?:

Whilst there are many providers the majority are just reselling standard BT wholesale products and so are limited to the services BT provide in that area. Most business are still unable to get fibre and for those on business estates or with exchange only lines no prospect of getting it in the foreseeable future.

Question 4: What opportunities do communications providers see in serving the SME market and how are these evolving as a result of developments in technology and infrastructure?:

Most of the focus of BT seems to be on home users and nothing geared specifically towards business users. Virgin's rollout has slowed dramatically and again they focus mainly on home users. There are a few WiMax suppliers who are offering faster connections but they have limited coverage.

Question 5: How far does the choice, quality and price of products in the retail market meet the needs of SMEs?:

As I mentioned previously most suppliers are reselling BT wholesale products so whilst there is some variance in the pricing the speed and reliability remains the same. If you have a long phone line and fibre isn't available in your area then you will be getting a slow and unreliable connection regardless of which ISP you sign up with.

Question 6: Are there challenges for communications providers in targeting the SME sector, and do these vary by geography, SME size and SME sector?:

Not really, a fast reliable internet connection is requirement to pretty much all businesses regardless of sector or location in the same way having phones is.

Question 7: Are there issues facing retail providers in engaging with wholesale providers in order to offer retail products which meet the needs of SMEs?:

Yes, as most internet services still run down a phone line they are reliant on BT for the types and speed of services they are able to offer.

Question 8: How far does the quality of service delivered by communications providers meet the needs of SMEs?:

The service they can provide is largely limited by things outside of their control, i.e. the length and quality of the phone lines or availability of fibre.

Question 9: What issues face SMEs in ensuring that they have appropriate SLAs and are able to gain redress when quality of services falls below the standards expected?:

Most business packages do not come with an SLA, it's only on more expensive leased line or EFM services are SLA's provided.

Question 10: What products and service enhancements are available, at what indicative price points, to deliver on SMEs? quality of service needs (e.g. in terms of technical product characteristics or fault resolution)?:

Not much without paying for leased lines, EFM, etc.

Question 11: What information is available to SMEs to enable them to select communications services appropriate for their business needs? Please identify any additional information or measures which you consider would enhance transparency for SMEs and your reasons for this view?:

As the services available are determined by location it is not always clear whether the packages advertised are available in that place or in terms of speed how close to the maximum shown they are likely to get.

Question 12: What factors do SMEs take into account when they are considering changing their communications service or provider? Please

identify any that you consider may deter SMEs from switching and your reasons for this view.:

Cost and reliability are the main reasons for changing. If they run any local services such as mail servers, websites, etc. then a change of provider will also mean a change in IP addresses, which in turn requires changes to DNS, reconfiguration of firewall's etc. The potential downtime and costs from that may deter changing to a different supplier.

Question 13: What evidence is there of issues where bad practices by communications providers causes harm to SMEs?:

Question 14: Are there any other issues in relation to the provision of communications services to SMEs, or SMEs' experience of these services, which you consider should be included within our assessment?:

Question 15: For any issues identified in response to any of the questions above do you have any views on how they may be resolved?:

The main problems are due to the reliance on BT's network but without a massive investment in rolling out cables I don't see how it can easily be resolved.