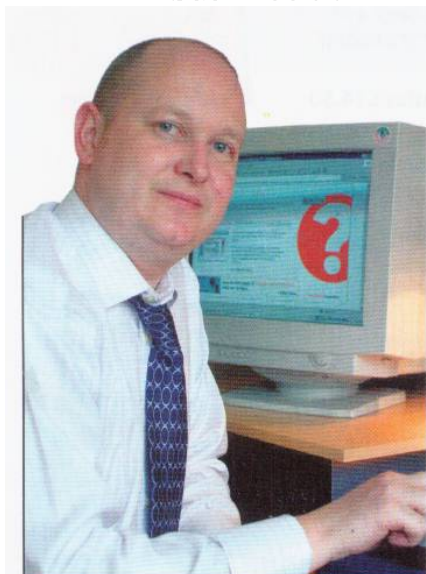




Jenni Conti helps you pick the right broadband internet service

BROADENING YOUR HORIZONS

There's been a lot of talk about the benefits of broadband, but what is the reality of high-speed internet access?



BT: SERVICE AT A PRICE

Mike Gorman is so happy with the broadband service he's received from BT that he's already recommended it to his friends. He ordered BT Openworld Home 500 Plug and Go online and found the whole process quick and easy. He had no problem establishing whether broadband was available in his local area, or finding the terms and conditions, and BT Openworld confirmed his order and line activation date immediately. When the software arrived two weeks later, it took him just 20 minutes to install.

Mike is particularly impressed with the speed at which he can now download material. 'Previously, it was not worth the cost or wait when downloads or upgrades for Windows or Office packages were needed,' he says. Mike has also found that the quality of music and radio streamed from the web is excellent.

But Mike is not so happy with the price he has to pay. At £29.99 per month, BT Openworld is one of the more expensive 500Kbps broadband services available.

Cash rich, time poor. It's a cliché, but it helps to explain why there are 35,000 new broadband connections in the UK each week. Clearly many of us are deciding that it's worth paying extra for speedier online access. But, with over 80 per cent of internet users still using a traditional dial-up ISP, we're a long way from the government's vision of 'broadband Britain' leading the way in e-commerce by 2005. So how does the ideal picture painted by government and industry measure up in real life? We've asked four readers to get connected and looked at what's involved in switching to broadband.

HOW FAST IS FAST?

The generally accepted definition of broadband is a high-speed, permanently available, or 'always-on', internet connection.

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tion that doesn't block your phone line. However, there's some debate about what constitutes 'high-speed'. In April the Advertising Standards Authority ruled that it was misleading for NTL to advertise its 128 Kilobits per second (Kbps) service as broadband, because consumers 'understand broadband to mean a service of upwards of 500Kbps.' Most broadband services do offer speeds of around 500Kbps, which is almost ten times faster than a standard 56Kbps dial-up modem.

However, a range of other speeds are on offer and which one you choose is likely to depend on how much you're willing to spend. NTL's 150Kbps connection is about three times the speed of a 56Kbps dial-up modem and costs £18 per month. This is about the same as the cheapest 500Kbps services, which cost from around £19 and are ten times faster than dial-up.

However, 'big name' providers, such as AOL, BT Openworld and Freeserve, charge nearer £30 a month for their 500Kbps services. Real speed junkies with money to burn might be tempted by Telewest Broadband's 2 Megabits per second (Mbps) service, which costs £55 per month and is a whopping 35 times faster than a dial-up connection. But, whatever speed you choose, broadband remains considerably more expensive than unmetered dial-up services, which cost from £10 per month.

THE BENEFITS OF BROADBAND

The most obvious benefit of the increased speed offered by broadband is that you can surf the internet faster. Web pages download more quickly, as do files – with broadband, a three-minute song should take less than a minute to download, compared with seven or eight minutes using a dial-up ISP. And you can do things that aren't really feasible using dial-up, such as playing online computer games and watching streamed video.

Even if tuning into Kylie's latest video or playing intergalactic war games aren't your thing, there are other compelling reasons to get broadband. You can stay online for as long as you like for a set fee and you don't have to worry about missing phone calls, so surfing should be more leisurely. It's also quicker to get online in the first place because, as soon as you log into your service, you're connected – there's no delay while your modem dials up, or any dropped connections.

Security. One downside of broadband is that an always-on connection is more vulnerable to hacking. So, it's even more



TELEWEST TELEPHONE TRIAL

Sandra Da Silva found ordering Telewest Blueyonder broadband by phone a slow and confusing process. It took about ten minutes to get through to customer services to place her order and she came off the phone unsure about exactly how much the whole package would cost. Installation didn't go

smoothly either. On the day that the engineer was due, Sandra rang to check that he was on his way. She was kept on hold for 20 minutes and then told that she had been given the wrong day. It took another phone call and much persistence to ensure that someone was sent out. The whole process upset me tremendously,' she says.

Overall Sandra is pleased with her broadband service, which is noticeably faster than her previous dial-up ISP, especially for downloading, searching the web and opening web pages. However, she's noticed that the speed sometimes fluctuates during the day and that it's more constant late in the evening.

important to install a firewall security program to protect you from this threat.

THE TECHNICAL BIT

Broadband is available via different technologies and the one you pick will depend on what's available in your local area (see 'Who can get it', p16). Many of us can access one of the main terrestrial services – ADSL and cable – but only a quarter of homes have a choice between the two.

You receive ADSL broadband via a BT or Kingston Communications phone line. Standard telephone lines have been adapted at the exchange, so that they can carry information more quickly than usual. The speed at which information is downloaded from the internet – for

instance, when you view a web page – is typically 500Kbps. Information you send, such as an email, goes at about half that speed. Voice and internet calls are separated, so that you can use your phone while you're online.

BROADBAND: THE HYPE VERSUS THE REALITY

HYPE High-speed access to the internet

REALITY The speeds quoted are maximum download speeds and will vary according to how many other people are using the same connection at the same time

HYPE Your internet connection is always on

REALITY Yes, your internet connection is always available when your computer is switched on, but you will still have to log in to your broadband

service each time you turn on your computer, if you want to go online

HYPE Unmetered

REALITY Some providers might limit the amount of internet data you can download

HYPE Streamed video and online gaming

REALITY Many of us will continue using the internet as we do now, just surf more quickly

BROADBAND

Broadband jargon explained

Which services are available in your area

How to pick a provider that suits you

