

How to Choose an Internet Provider

Wellbeing area: Social / Money / Home / Health / Positivity / Independence / Work
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INTRODUCTION

The internet is almost a household requirement, similar to electricity and hot-and-cold running water. It is extremely useful for finding out anything you might need to research, managing your banking or bills, online shopping and entertainment. It can also be a great way of keeping in touch with friends and family, via email, social media, such as Facebook, and increasingly online activities, where you can meet up with others socially, for example by joining a Zoom meeting. Age UK Islington's new programme of online Get Togethers (developed to complement their community Get Togethers) are accessed in this way.

LET'S GET STARTED TOGETHER!

What do I need to consider getting online?

Most people with a smartphone, will already be able to get online. Smartphone contracts usually come with a data allowance that enables you to browse the internet. The only restriction is the size of the screen and unless you have unlimited data, it can be a simple way of sending and receiving email, but expensive way of getting online to access websites.

You can also use tablets, laptops or desktop PCs to get onto the internet, but in the same way as you need electricity or gas coming into your home, you'll need to set up an internet connection using an internet provider.

How do I choose an internet provider?

Choosing an internet provider can be daunting if you are seeking one for the first time. For each deal, you will want to consider, besides the price, things such as speed, data limits, connection type, contract length and reputation (e.g. reliability of internet service). You should also consider any setup fee and bundled deals such as with TV or home phone. Let's take a look at each of these elements.

What Internet Speed do I need?

One of the main factors to consider when choosing a deal for internet access - commonly referred as broadband - is how fast the internet will be.

When you click a link to a website or send an email, the speed of data transfer affects how quickly you get a response. No one wants slow internet, but faster speeds are usually more expensive and there's no point in having more speed than you need.

Here is a rough guide to the minimum internet speed needed to perform various tasks, measured in Megabits per second (Mbps) –

General web surfing, email, social media	1 Mbps
BBC iPlayer	1.5 - 5 Mbps
Online gaming	3 Mbps
Standard-definition video streaming	3-4 Mbps
High-definition video streaming	5-8 Mbps

The more people using the broadband at the same time, the slower it usually is for them. Therefore, if the broadband is going to be shared by several people in a household, you would need faster internet speed.

The lowest priced packages deliver around 10 Mbps. If two people in the household are watching high definition movies at the same time on different TVs, the quality would be affected. But for one person, this would be fine.

Price comparison websites can tell you a range of internet speeds available for your area.

What Data Limit do I need?

Every time you do something on the internet (e.g. surf the web, email, watch a YouTube video) you will use internet data. Some deals have a monthly data cap, and there is normally an extra charge for any data used in excess of that cap. Data usage is normally measured in Gigabytes (GB).

Here is a rough guide to the number of gigabytes needed to perform various tasks on a device –

General web surfing (includes email + social media)	Up to 10GB/month
General web surfing + catch up (TV/radio)	10-30GB/month
General web surfing + catch up + downloads (e.g. video/music)	40-80GB/month
General web surfing + catch up + downloads + gaming	40GB-unlimited/month

Having an unlimited data allowance is generally more expensive than capped, but it could work out cheaper overall and save you the trouble of having to monitor data usage. It is particularly recommended if the broadband will be shared by several people.

What internet connection type do I need?

Broadband providers make a big deal about the type of internet connection, whether its 'standard broadband', fibre or cable. In some parts of the country, standard broadband can be quite

slow, but in cities, the speed of standard broadband is usually sufficient for most purposes, unless you're planning to use it to play the latest multi-player games.

The most common ways of obtaining internet in a home are –

DSL or 'standard broadband' - The internet is carried via a standard telephone line to your home. Providers typically offer DSL with average speeds of up to 11Mbps.

Fibre (including 'superfast fibre') – The internet is carried via fibre optic cable and usually also by telephone line. Fibre cable is better and more reliable than telephone line for carrying internet data. Providers typically offer fibre with average speeds of up to 67Mbps.

With DSL and fibre broadband, phone calls can still be made with the telephone line they use. Something called a modem/router is fitted in your home to transmit the internet to your device(s) such as a tablet, laptop or PC.

The distance that the data travels via telephone line to your home and the condition of the telephone wiring can restrict the internet speed. Some DSL and fibre providers in the UK include BT, John Lewis, Plusnet, Post Office and Shell Energy.

Cable - The internet is carried via coaxial cable and fibre optic cable. The main cable provider in the UK is Virgin Media. They typically offer speeds of up to 516Mbps. Cable can be faster but is likely to be more expensive with lots of bundled TV options.

Mobile or '4G broadband' or '5G broadband' – The internet is carried over a mobile phone network. Smartphones also obtain internet this way.

Mobile broadband speed varies greatly - It is affected by - (i) The proximity of your location to the nearest mobile mast that a provider uses; and (ii) The version/generation of the signal (e.g.

3G, 4G, 5G). Each new generation is faster but initially usually less available than its predecessor. You should always discover the network coverage around your home before selecting a deal. All mobile broadband providers have a coverage map.

Mobile broadband deals normally have a monthly data usage cap. Some mobile phone networks in the UK include 3, Vodafone and EE.

If you are choosing broadband for the first time and only for yourself, then selecting either a DSL or Mobile broadband deal (with an adequate data usage allowance) is normally a good choice. That way, you will avoid paying for super-fast speeds that you may not need if all you will do is surf the web, email and watch some YouTube videos.

What to look for when gauging an internet provider reputation?

Some providers may give poor customer support or their broadband may be unreliable. Before committing to a provider, you should check their reputation, for instance by searching for their name using an internet browser. Additionally, some broadband comparison websites give provider ratings.

What to consider when choosing your contract length?

Broadband contracts typically last between 1, 12, 18 and 24 months and there are sometime hefty fees if you wish to terminate a contract early. Make sure you understand the conditions for early termination of contract before you sign it.

Will I have to pay a setup fee / installation charge?

Many broadband deals include some upfront costs relating to getting set-up. For DSL/standard or fibre broadband, there might be a cost for installing a telephone line (if you do not already have one).

Which bundle packages should I consider?

The type of package you choose will depend on your budget, whether you want to use landline phone to make calls (rather than, or in addition to a mobile phone) and whether you want to access lots of additional or specialist TV channels for things like sport or film. There are a lot of TV channels available for free already, for which you simply need the regular TV licence – 60+ channels, including 15+ offering high definition TV.

TV and broadband packages

If you want these additional TV channels together with your broadband, it's cheaper as a package rather than paying for them separately. There are the five TV services commonly available in the UK - Sky, Virgin Media, TalkTalk TV, BT TV and Now TV (Now Broadband). Some DSL and fibre providers bundle free landline calls.

Broadband and landline phone packages

If you sign up for an internet service via your phone line (standard or DSL) the internet provider will need to take over your landline phone provision and you will be paying them for your phone calls. Many providers will bundle calls into the overall package but there are different options with different costs (e.g. weekend only calls or weekend and evenings only calls). Calls that are made outside of the bundled times are charged at the rate set by the internet provider and this can get expensive. You should consider your usual pattern of phone usage so you can choose the best option for you.

Where to find deals?

Broadband comparison sites are a good place to find deals. Here are some examples -

Money Saving Expert Broadband Unbundled Deals -
<https://broadband.moneysavingexpert.com/>

Broadband Genie Compare Broadband Deals -
<https://www.broadbandgenie.co.uk/broadband>

Uswitch Compare Broadband Deals -
<https://www.uswitch.com/broadband/>

For mobile phones

Uswitch - Mobile Broadband Deals -
<https://www.uswitch.com/broadband/mobile-broadband/>

Money Super Market Best Mobile Broadband Deals -
<https://www.moneysupermarket.com/broadband/mobile-broadband/>

For anyone on a low income / benefits

BT have a low-cost phone and broadband deal for anyone who is on low income and government benefits; it would be worth considering and comparing with other options -

<https://btplc.com/inclusion/ProductsAndServices/BTBasic/BTBasicBroadband/index.htm>

READY TO GO? That's great! Taking all the elements above into consideration should help you decide which internet provider and plan might be best for you. Once you've got internet access at home, visit our website at <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/islington/> to get familiar with all our services and see how we can help you next.

GOT SOME QUESTIONS? If you'd like to know any more about the above or need some support getting started just give our Helpline a call 0207 281 6018 / email gethelp@ageukislington.org.uk (Mon to Fri 9 - 5pm)

Please note we cannot recommend or endorse. Information

provided is accurate to the best of our knowledge at the time of publishing. If you find any inaccuracies, please notify us gethelp@ageukislington.org.uk

What can Age UK Islington help with? *Age UK Islington provides adults (16 yrs+) in Islington with information and guidance about anything to do with your wellbeing, e.g. debt, housing issues, support for unpaid carers (Islington Carers Hub), bereavement and much more. We can also help you get the most of the local area, e.g. finding affordable social groups or training. Our staff are experts in finding the best way forward, and have lots of knowledge of specialist local partner services.*