

Broadband Briefing

The UK market, technologies, speeds and what to do when things go wrong

In recent years, broadband has become of central importance to both consumers and business. Large chunks of our daily lives are now spent online or with the help of online tools. No matter whether it's staying in touch with friends or business contacts, shopping, banking, accessing government services, streaming music or indeed contacting your local MP, the use of the internet has become an essential part of everyday life.

ISPA, the Internet Services Providers' Association, is the voice of the internet industry in the UK. ISPA has over 200 members ranging from SMEs to large corporations, across the sector. In this briefing paper we provide an outline of some of the key aspects of the UK broadband market and infrastructure.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch with us if you have any questions or would like to discuss internet policy: admin@ispa.org.uk or phone 020 3397 3304.

The Broadband Market

The UK has one of the most competitive broadband markets in the world with lower prices than many comparable European countries. Broadband in the UK is delivered by a wide range of companies, ranging from national providers offering a wide selection of services to local or specialised providers that focus on a specific aspect of the market. For instance, several ISPs focus exclusively on the business market and offer products that specifically meets the needs of SMEs or large corporations.

Not all providers operate their own complete networks. These companies may have their own equipment in local exchanges (the system where phone and internet communications systems are based) but rely on wholesale products, offered by a small number of infrastructure providers, to provide a full service. The largest of these providers is Openreach, part of the BT Group, who manage the first mile of the communications network between homes, businesses and the exchange. This explains why an Openreach engineer may turn up to connect a premise or fix a fault, even though the customer is with another provider.

Broadband technologies

At its core, the Internet is based on fibre-optic cables. However, there are wide range of technologies that are used to connect customers to the Internet, including copper cables, direct fibre connection, fixed wireless, 4G, Wi-Fi and satellite. These are able to deliver different levels of speed.

The type of connection available to customers varies by geographic location and also depends on demand. In some areas of the UK, a certain type of technology, for example, Fibre to the Premise (FTTP), capable of delivering very fast speeds, may not be available as the local demand is not sufficient to offset a provider's investment. However, standard speeds will usually be sufficient to access everyday internet applications (email, VoIP, browsing, streaming services) but superfast speeds open up the possibility of doing much more, particularly in a family that uses multiple devices.

The Government's broadband rollout programme (led by Broadband Delivery UK) is addressing the issue of rural connectivity and the digital divide. But several ISPs, both large and small, are also making large scale investment to address coverage in both urban and rural areas. ISPs are also trialling new technology to specifically address not-spots in rural and urban areas. This will be the Government priority for broadband in the next few years.

The Internet Value Chain

Broadband providers supply access to the Internet, but they do not necessarily have direct control over the services that are accessed via their connections. In fact, many different companies can be involved in delivering a service such as accessing a website or a TV catch-up service. For example, the internet value chain (the different companies involved in providing services online) for the blog of a local business may include:

- Online services – in this case the blog aimed at customers of the business
- Platforms – in this case the platform on which the blog is operated (more widely, social media and other sites that provide a framework for publishing content)
- Hosting providers – in this case a data centre which allows the platform to store the relevant information (more widely, places where data is stored on behalf of a business or individual in 'the cloud')
- Access providers – supply the business and readers with access to the Internet

The presence of this internet value chain is neither obvious nor relevant to day-to-day consumers. However, it is of fundamental importance to policy-makers, as policy measures aimed at encouraging or preventing a certain type of online behaviour, need to be directed to the correct part of the value chain to be effective.

Broadband speeds

The speed of a broadband connection is often a key criteria for consumers and businesses when choosing a provider. Connections that deliver 24 Mbps or 30 Mbps are usually classed as 'superfast', while those with speeds of over 100 Mbps are described as 'ultrafast'. Broadband speeds can vary by geographic location, but wiring within a customer's premise and the equipment used (e.g. the router, tablet or phone) also affect speeds. Most ISPs provide their customers with a speed estimate before purchase, with the ability to cancel or switch contracts if the speeds are not met.

What to when things go wrong

Providers strive to constantly deliver high-quality services, but as with most technical services things do not always go according to plan. All providers operate customer service departments or helplines and regard customer service as a key priority. ISPs are also members of one of two Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) services. In cases where customers feel that a provider has not handled a complaint appropriately, they can lodge their case with the ADR services, free of charge, once a deadlock with the provider has been reached, or after 8 weeks from the initial complaint. In addition, ISPA operates a complaints hotline, where we provide consumers with help in dealing with our members.

Other policy issues

This briefing paper is focused on broadband, but there are a number of other policy issues that are of relevance to ISPA and our members and have direct and indirect effects on future network developments. Some of these issues are likely to be debated in Parliament in the coming months and include:

- Communications data and surveillance
- Online safety
- Ofcom's Digital Communications Review
- European Digital Single Market and a potential reform of online liability
- Extremism
- Cyber-security

What we can do for you

We are here to help and you can get in touch with us when you need assistance with an enquiry from a constituent, would like to talk about broadband or other internet policy, or if you would like to find out about and possibly meet with local ISP businesses in your constituency. Please contact us on: 020 3397 3304 or admin@ispa.org.uk.