

There are a bewildering range of business broadband services available in the UK, but some services are far more specific for business than others. Our guide hopes to help you make the right buying decision for your business.

Contention

One of the key factors when choosing broadband for your organisation is the level of contention applied throughout the circuit.

Most buyers are aware that contention is the number of individual users or businesses that share the same slice of bandwidth from their ISP, but contention can be “hidden” by providers in many ways.

Be very wary of providers offering 1:1 contention services at very cheap rates (i.e. below £100/month). It is not financially viable to secure 1:1 contention bandwidth at such cheap rates (unless perhaps the provider is making a loss on each sale). Typically, when providers sell very cheap 1:1 contention broadband, what they are actually providing is a contended line from the exchange, which then hands off to their wholesale partner and/or their own network. It is at this level that the provider can claim 1:1 contention. At the exchange level however, your business line could be shared with multiple users before handoff to your ISP.

Know Your Products

One of the most cost effective ways to receive uncontended business broadband is through a dedicated SDSL circuit. The “S” stands for Symmetric, meaning companies can send data as fast as receiving it. SDSL is provisioned for data only. It has no telephone (PSTN) number and no dialling tone, and upstream and downstream throughput is guaranteed at 1:1 contention. Recently, a range of ADSL2+ products have entered the marketplace to challenge SDSL. While ADSL2+ has a place for small businesses or as a backup line, it is by no means a direct replacement for SDSL.

All ADSL2+ has the following qualities:

- Highly contended at exchange level
- Performance-sensitive beyond 1Km from the exchange
- Limited Service Level Agreements
- No Speed guarantees

A further variant of ADSL2+ is ADSL2+ M, which provides further upstream capacity up to 2.5Mb. Again, this product is highly contended and the top-line data speeds are not guaranteed. Some providers are badging a variant of ADSL M as “SDSL M”. Fusion recommends checking very carefully that “SDSL M” is truly SDSL, not simply an overpriced residential ADSL2+

product.

Know Your Market

The broadband marketplace evolves rapidly and, in terms of major providers, is to an extent shrinking due to numerous takeovers and buyouts.

One of the key developments over the last 2/3 years is the focus on the residential mass market in the UK by the largest providers.

This has fuelled the buyouts of some of the larger business-focused ISPs, with Easynet for example being purchased by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp to deliver Sky broadband to home users.

Other companies, such as Tiscali, who have tried to split delivery of their services between residential and business/wholesale, have suffered well publicised financial difficulties in recent times, culminating in a cut price buyout by the Carphone Warehouse to strengthen their hold on the home user market.

Conversely, Fusion's main premium partner, Cable & Wireless PLC, recently completed their acquisition of Thus PLC, cementing their reputation as a business and corporate only provider.

Most UK providers buy "LLU" services (i.e. handoff from the local exchange) from the biggest carriers. When making a decision to purchase services, be certain who you are actually trusting at exchange level, as this where the majority of potential support issues occur. You may be buying from a business ISP, but are they buying from a corporate provider?

Question Checklist

(A brief cheat sheet to make your buying decision easier)

1. What is the contention ratio of your service?

(Ideally, you want as low a ratio as possible within budget. Remember that 50:1 contention business broadband is little more than home user broadband with "business" inserted at the front, and will be suited for home workers or very small businesses only)

2. Is that contention guaranteed from my premises and through your network?

(If the answer focuses on the provider's own network rather than exchange level, be very wary of accepting this as a true 1:1 contention service)

3. What speed do you guarantee for the service?/At what speed would you consider the service to be faulty?

(This one will really get them. If they are guaranteeing contention then they must be able to

guarantee throughput also. Due to overheads on a DSL line, do not be surprised if their guaranteed rate on a 1:1 contention line is up to 15% less than the stated product. Any more than that and there is a problem. If they state that they cannot guarantee throughput at all then this should raise concerns.

4. Who provides the handoff to your network from the exchange?

(Most providers (including Fusion) do not maintain their own equipment at the exchange and partner with LLU providers for the handoff to their own network. This is crucial to your buying decision, as it does not matter how good the providers' own network is, if the company managing the equipment at exchange level is weak, then the service will fail. Remember, over 95% of DSL line related faults occur at exchange level or in the "First mile" from your premises)

5. What is included in the pricing?

(Specifically, check that a true Enhanced Care SLA is included in the price. One of the key characteristics for 1:1 broadband is its comparison to a leased line and associated Service Level Agreement. Also check the hardware options (make sure it includes configuration) and IP addressing. As true 1:1 contention services are only supplied on minimum 12 month contracts, add up the figures to get a total 12 month spend. Once you added up the extras needed to make the service a true professional business product, you may be surprised by the difference from the original cost)

6. Request a full quote in writing and start the clock

(If the provider truly cares, you should get a standard quote in your inbox within minutes. Make sure you request they put down in writing any promises relating to the questions you've asked. If they take hours to respond, this should give a fairly clear indication of how they look after their customers.