

Broadband to 'skip a generation'

Communities bypassed by broadband should be the first to get even faster services, says an Ofcom advisory group.

The regulator's Consumer Panel said excluded areas of the UK should "leapfrog" to next generation access.

Consumer Panel chair Anna Bradley admitted that the areas concerned were likely to be the least cost-effective places for such services.

But, she said, the step was vital to prevent Britain's digital divide deepening.

Public services

"If we are imaginative and use a mix of private and public business models, we could provide a way for consumers who are excluded from first generation broadband to leapfrog straight to the next generation," she said.

Super-fast broadband, with speeds of up to 100 Mbps (megabits per second), could be used by government to deliver a range of public services, she added.

Telemedicine, the delivery of specialist services to disabled people and the provision of education to remote communities are all given as examples by the panel, which was established by Ofcom to represent consumers in the markets it regulates.

"Decisions need to be informed by a proper sense of the value of next generation networks, not just to companies and consumers, but to the economy and society as a whole," said Ms Bradley.

Broadband refuseniks

According to the Office of National Statistics, 35% of UK households do not have internet access.

Some 1.48 million (9%) of UK households which have net access use a dial-up connection despite the fact that most could get broadband if they wanted.

A recent report from consumer group BroadbandChoices found that the cheapest dial-up connection costs £175.89 (AOL Anytime) in the first year compared with £89.97 (TalkTalk) for broadband.

"That's a price difference of nearly 100%," said Michael Phillips, product director of BroadbandChoices.

While some find the pay as you go rate and the lack of a minimum contract period good reasons to stick with dial-up, many are just unwilling to shop around.

"The most common reason for sticking with an inferior service is simply customer inertia. The longer people spend on dial-up, the more money they are throwing down the drain," he said.

Average broadband speeds

Area of UK	Download (Kbps)
London	4460
North East	3594
North West	3393
East Midlands	3275
South East	3253
Yorkshire & Humberside	3204
West Midlands	3193
East	3090
Scotland	2876
South West	2869
Wales	2587
Northern Ireland	2258

Source: Thinkbroadband

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