

How they scored...

	Provider	Products & services	Customer service	Performance	Value for money	Overall	Pros and cons
1	PlusNet	23	19	20	22	84	Pros Wide range of good value packages, great for site builders Cons At such low margins can it stay like this?
2=	Eclipse	18	19	23	20	80	Pros Top performance, cheap broadband Cons Few additional services thrown in for free
2=	Telewest	21	18	20	21	80	Pros Cheap 1 and 2Mbps services Cons You have to be in a Telewest region
4	NTL	21	15	19	22	77	Pros Excellent value broadband and dial-up services Cons Plenty of customer service horror stories
5	Claranet	17	22	19	18	76	Pros Quality customer service Cons Relatively expensive
6	AOL	20	20	17	18	75	Pros Perfect for novices Cons Not the quickest, experts should avoid it
7	Virgin	17	20	17	19	73	Pros Good tech support Cons Recent performance problems
8	Tiscali	21	17	16	18	72	Pros Wide range of options Cons Customer service and performance issues
9	BT Openworld	18	16	19	17	70	Pros Spam protection Cons Too expensive
10	Freemove	18	15	17	18	68	Pros Good portal Cons Poor customer service

Conclusion

We have a clear winner this year – our Best ISP on the Planet accolade goes to PlusNet.

The Sheffield-based provider hasn't always had it so good, but it now offers a wide range of products at impressively low prices. Last time around we said PlusNet needed to prove that it could deliver consistent performance, and it has duly obliged. But the icing on the cake is all the extra features you get with your connection, which include bags of free Web space and support for CGI, PHP and MySQL, which is rare for ISPs.

We do wonder how PlusNet is managing to do all this on such low margins, and hope that the quality can be maintained. Its products are attracting a lot of attention and rapid growth seems likely.

Tied in second place, both Eclipse Internet and Telewest Broadband have performed very well. Although Eclipse is a business ISP, its consumer packages are very competitive, and its broadband performance is second to none. We'll be watching it.

Telewest has also had a busy year, making significant changes to its services. The



plusnet

superfast broadband services are great value, and it still has one of the best dial up packages around. It's just a shame that only 5 million UK homes can access the cable provider.

There was little to choose from the chasing pack, but we were disappointed to see Claranet drop down the table. The ISP really hasn't moved with the times, refusing to lower its prices or offer new services.

It still seems to be keeping its customers happy, though.

Despite improvements this year, BT Openworld still has a lot to do to show that it's worth paying more for its services. The new partnership with Yahoo! is positive, but BT needs to cut its own prices if it wants to truly lead the campaign to encourage the growth of broadband.

The real shock, however, is Freemove's decline. The country's biggest ISP was always going to have its fair share of problems, but it seems that dial-up performance and customer service have been particularly poor lately. Perhaps it should spend less on advertising and squabbles with its rivals, and more on providing an all-round quality service to all its members.

We don't doubt that some of you will disagree with our conclusions, but they're based on evidence from a wide range of sources. Our most valuable information comes from our readers, so if you want to leap to the defence of your ISP or let us know your own customer service horror stories, please email us at feedback@internet.emap.com. Don't forget to have your say on our forums at www.internet-magazine.com/forums too and make sure you respond to next year's reader survey.