

Broadband must be made affordable for everyone

The coronavirus pandemic has shown us how indispensable broadband is. It has allowed people to continue to manage their lives. Working and studying online, accessing benefits and banking all require a reliable, stable connection.

Even before the pandemic, we were concerned that many people couldn't afford broadband. In 2018, Ofcom found that only 63% of the 'most financially vulnerable' group had fixed-line broadband, compared with 82% of the overall UK population.¹

Millions more have now lost income and fallen into debt, making broadband unaffordable at the very moment it's most needed.² After the pandemic, making sure everyone has access will be crucial to rebuilding the economy.

What our data tells us

In November 2020, we found that an estimated 2.3 million people had fallen behind on their broadband bill.³

Rashid's* story

Rashid lost his job during lockdown and has had to rely on Universal Credit (UC). Rashid has no spare income to pay for broadband. Without it, he can't access the best energy deals or get support for his disabilities. Living in a rural area - and with his local library closed - he is struggling.



What needs to happen?

We strongly back Ofcom's call for all providers to offer an affordable tariff for people on low incomes - but voluntary action isn't enough.

Currently **only three providers** offer an affordable tariff.

And people struggle to switch. **78% of broadband customers said they haven't switched providers in the last 18 months.** Reasons included: too much hassle (29%), too much else on their minds (13%), and fear of losing connection whilst switching (12%).⁴

The European Electronic Communications Code was transposed into national legislation in December 2020. **With approval from the Secretary of State, Ofcom can now require providers to introduce affordable broadband tariffs in the UK.**

They should take this opportunity to ensure customers of all providers have access to stable, reliable internet.

The internet has become even more essential, especially for vulnerable groups.

In August we asked people with a home internet connection about usage and affordability.⁵ Since the pandemic began:



77% of people in a single-parent household said they were more reliant on their internet connection.



82% of disabled people used their internet to buy essentials such as food and medicine.



34% of people on low incomes said they have found using the internet important to be able to look for work.

And yet people are struggling to afford it.



1 in 6 broadband customers struggled to pay their bill between March 2020 and January 2021.⁶



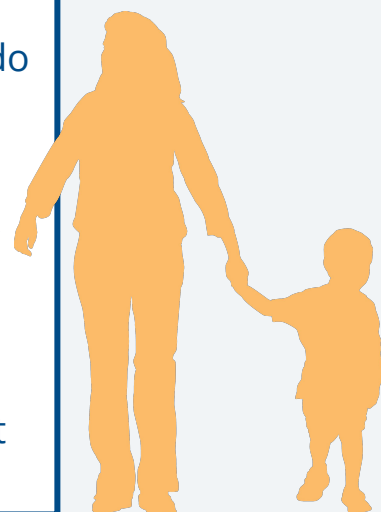
We found that some groups have been disproportionately affected: disabled people, people on means-tested benefits, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds were finding it harder to pay.⁷

Clare's* story

Clare works in the arts and is a single mum of three. She's disabled and currently unemployed. She's receiving UC but doesn't have enough money for broadband. This has meant that during lockdowns, her children use her mobile data to do their school work. But it has proved inadequate and they've fallen far behind.

Clare says: "We couldn't get rid of the heating and the water, [...] we already cut back on food...[broadband] had to go.

"Broadband was much better [than mobile data], everything was more efficient. Sometimes I might spend a good half an hour loading up a page, putting in all the information, then it will crash and everything will be lost and that's it."



Methodology note

1. Ofcom (January 2019) [Access and Inclusion in 2018](#)
 2. Citizens Advice (December 2020) [Debt at the close of 2020](#)
 3. ICM Unlimited surveyed a representative sample of 6,004 adults living in the UK. The sample was weighted to be nationally representative of the UK. Fieldwork took place between 12 and 25 November. 264 out of 6,004 respondents (4.4%) said they were behind on their broadband bill. Using The Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimate (Mid 2019: April 2020 LA Boundaries) of 52,673,433 adults (18+) in the UK, we estimate that this has affected 2.3 million people.
 4. Opinium surveyed 2,008 adults online, between 15-19 January 2021. Out of those with broadband (1,646), 78% said they hadn't switched providers in the last 18 months. Respondents said reasons for this included: I can't be bothered with the hassle of switching (29%), I have too many other things on my mind (13%), I am worried about losing internet when switching (12%). Data was weighted to be nationally representative of the UK adult population.
 5. Opinium surveyed 3,454 adults online, between 14-27 August 2020. Questions on affordability and usage were shown to 92% of respondents (3,190) with home internet. Data was weighted to be nationally representative of the UK adult population.
 6. Opinium surveyed 2,008 adults online, between 15-19 January 2021. This question was shown to 82% of respondents (1,646) with broadband. Data was weighted to be nationally representative of the UK adult population.
 7. In the Opinium August survey, 28% of those on means-tested benefits, 32% of people from ethnic minority backgrounds, and 27% of disabled people said they struggled to afford their broadband bill generally, compared to 16% of the overall UK adult population.
- * Names of the case studies have been changed for anonymity.

