

## How they scored...

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

## Conclusion

**W**e 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 Freeserve'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](mailto:feedback@internet.emap.com). Don't forget to have your say on our forums at [www.internet-magazine.com/forums](http://www.internet-magazine.com/forums) too and make sure you respond to next year's reader survey.

