ISP Comparison & Selection Guide

How to evaluate, compare, and select the right business internet service provider — connection types, contract terms, SLA frameworks, and critical questions to ask.

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KEY TOPICS	EVALUATION CRITERIA	COMPARISON MATRIX	DOWNLOAD NO STRINGS

About This Guide

This guide provides practical, actionable advice for UK businesses. Work through each section to build a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Use the information to make informed decisions and implement best practices.

1 Types of Business Internet Connection

Understanding the available connection types is essential for making the right choice. Each technology has distinct characteristics.

UK businesses have several internet connectivity options, each suited to different requirements and budgets. The right choice depends on your **bandwidth needs, reliability requirements, budget, and location**. Here is a breakdown of the main options available in 2026.

FTTC (Fibre to the Cabinet)

Fibre runs to the street cabinet, with the final connection over copper. Download speeds typically reach **40–80 Mbps** with upload speeds of 10–20 Mbps. Affordable and widely available, but the copper "last mile" limits performance and introduces contention during peak hours. Suitable for small offices with fewer than 15 users and limited cloud dependency.

FTTP (Fibre to the Premises)

Full fibre directly into your building, delivering speeds from **100 Mbps to 1 Gbps** symmetrically. Significantly more reliable than FTTC with lower latency and no copper degradation. Availability is expanding rapidly across the UK but is not yet universal. Excellent for businesses up to 100 users with moderate cloud usage.

Leased Lines (Dedicated Ethernet)

A dedicated, uncontended circuit from your premises to the ISP's network. Speeds from **10 Mbps to 10 Gbps** with guaranteed symmetrical bandwidth and SLAs typically including 99.95% uptime and 5-hour fault repair. The gold standard for businesses requiring consistent performance, but significantly more expensive — typically **£200–£800 per month** depending on speed and location.

4G/5G Mobile Broadband

Cellular connectivity using business-grade routers. 4G typically delivers **20–50 Mbps** while 5G can reach **100–500 Mbps** in coverage areas. Ideal as a backup or failover connection, for temporary offices, or locations where fixed-line options are limited. Subject to signal strength, contention, and data allowances.

FEATURE	FTTC	FTTP	LEASED LINE	4G/5G
Typical download speed	40–80 Mbps	100 Mbps–1 Gbps	10 Mbps–10 Gbps	20–500 Mbps
Upload speed	10–20 Mbps	Up to 1 Gbps	Symmetrical	10–100 Mbps
Contention	Shared (up to 50:1)	Shared (lower)	Uncontended (1:1)	Shared (variable)
Typical SLA uptime	None / best effort	99.5–99.9%	99.95–99.99%	None / best effort
Monthly cost	£25–£60	£30–£100	£200–£800+	£30–£80
Best for	Small offices	Growing SMEs	Mission-critical	Backup / temporary

2 How to Evaluate ISPs

Beyond headline speeds and prices, these criteria determine the true quality of an ISP's service.

Choosing an ISP based solely on price or advertised speed is a common mistake. The **total cost of ownership, service reliability, and support quality** matter far more to a business than saving £20 per month on a cheaper circuit that fails when you need it most.

- **Network resilience and redundancy:** Ask whether the ISP has multiple upstream carriers and diverse fibre routes. A single-homed ISP is vulnerable to upstream failures that affect all their customers simultaneously.
- **SLA commitments with teeth:** A 99.9% uptime SLA is meaningless without financial penalties for breaches. Ask what happens when they miss their targets — service credits should be automatic, not something you have to chase.
- **UK-based support team:** When your internet is down at 4pm on a Friday, you need fast access to competent engineers, not a scripted call centre. Ask where their support team is based and what their average hold time is.
- **Proactive monitoring:** The best ISPs detect and begin resolving faults before you even notice them. Ask whether they monitor your circuit proactively or only respond to faults you report.
- **Installation and lead times:** Leased lines can take 60–90 days to install. FTTP is typically 10–20 working days. Factor lead times into your planning and ask for guaranteed installation dates.
- **Scalability:** Can the ISP increase your bandwidth quickly when you need it? Some circuits can be upgraded remotely in hours; others require a new physical installation taking weeks.
- **Financial stability:** A smaller ISP may offer great service but could be acquired or go out of business. Check Companies House filings and ask about their customer base size and growth trajectory.

Tip: Request a Trial

Some ISPs offer trial periods or will install a secondary circuit at reduced cost for evaluation. This lets you test real-world performance before committing to a long-term contract.

3 Key Contract Terms to Understand

ISP contracts contain terms that directly affect your costs, flexibility, and service quality. Know what to look for.

ISP contracts in the UK typically run for **12, 24, or 36 months**. Longer terms usually mean lower monthly costs, but less flexibility if your needs change or the service disappoints. Here are the critical terms to review:

- **Minimum contract term:** The period during which early termination incurs charges. Negotiate the shortest term possible for your first circuit with a new provider. Consider 12 months initially, extending once you're satisfied.
- **Notice period for cancellation:** Typically 30–90 days. Ensure you can give notice at any point after the minimum term, not only at the anniversary date.
- **Price escalation clauses:** Most ISPs increase prices annually by CPI or RPI plus a margin. Cap this at RPI + 3% maximum. Some providers now charge fixed annual increases of £3–£5 per month.
- **Guaranteed minimum bandwidth:** For leased lines, this should be 100% of contracted speed. For FTTP, look for a guaranteed minimum of at least 50% of headline speed at peak times.
- **Fair usage and traffic management:** Business circuits should have no data caps or throttling. Confirm this explicitly in writing, especially for FTTP and FTTC connections.
- **Service credits for SLA breaches:** Understand exactly how credits are calculated, how to claim them, and whether they are applied automatically or require you to file a claim.

Watch Out: Auto-Renewal Traps

Many ISP contracts auto-renew for the original contract length if you don't give notice by the deadline. Set a calendar reminder 4 months before the end of your contract to review and renegotiate. Never let a circuit auto-renew without reviewing alternatives.

4 SLA Comparison Framework

Use this framework to compare the service level commitments of shortlisted ISPs side by side.

An SLA comparison matrix makes it easy to objectively compare ISP commitments. Complete this table for each ISP you're evaluating and use it to drive your negotiation.

SLA METRIC	ISP A	ISP B	ISP C
Guaranteed uptime (%)			
Guaranteed minimum speed			
Fault response time			
Fault repair time (standard)			
Fault repair time (enhanced)			
Service credits for downtime			
Proactive monitoring included			
24/7 support availability			
Dedicated account manager			
Installation timeframe			
Contract minimum term			
Monthly cost (inc. VAT)			
Annual price increase cap			

Weigh each metric according to its importance to your business. For most organisations, **uptime guarantee, fault repair time, and proactive monitoring** should carry the highest weighting. Price should be a factor but never the sole deciding criterion — the cheapest connection is the most expensive one when it fails.

5 Questions to Ask Providers

These questions reveal the true quality and reliability of an ISP beyond their marketing materials.

Ask these questions during the sales process and **get the answers in writing**. How a provider responds tells you as much as the answers themselves. Evasiveness or reluctance to put commitments on paper is a significant red flag.

- **What is your network architecture?** How many upstream carriers do you use? Do you have diverse fibre routes? What happens if one of your core routers fails?
- **What was your actual uptime over the past 12 months?** Ask for real data, not just the SLA target. Any provider proud of their performance will share this readily.
- **How do you handle planned maintenance?** How much notice is given? Is it always performed outside business hours? Can we opt out of specific maintenance windows?
- **What monitoring do you provide?** Will you detect a fault before we report it? What alerting do you have in place? Can we access a customer portal showing circuit health?
- **Where is your support team based?** What are your average response times? Can we speak to a real engineer, or is first-line support scripted?
- **What happens during the installation?** Who is my project manager? What site preparation is needed? What are the most common causes of installation delays?
- **Can you provide references from similar businesses?** Ask for customers of similar size and in a similar location. Contact them directly to verify the provider's claims.
- **What is the exit process?** How do you facilitate a handover if we decide to leave? Will you provide full technical documentation of our circuit configuration?

6 Red Flags & Common Pitfalls

Warning signs that should make you think twice before signing with a particular ISP.

Not all ISPs are created equal. Here are the **warning signs** that indicate a provider may not deliver the service your business needs:

- **No SLA or vague SLA language:** If a provider cannot commit to specific uptime, response, and repair targets with financial penalties, they are not offering a business-grade service.
- **Reluctance to share performance data:** A provider unwilling to share their actual uptime statistics or customer satisfaction scores likely has something to hide.
- **Excessively long contract terms:** Insisting on 36-month minimum contracts without a break clause suggests they retain customers through lock-in rather than service quality.
- **No proactive monitoring:** If they only know about faults when you report them, they are reactive and will always be slower to resolve issues.
- **Single point of failure in their network:** If they rely on a single upstream carrier or have no network redundancy, their entire customer base goes down together.
- **Outsourced first-line support:** Scripted call centres with no technical knowledge waste your time during outages when every minute counts.
- **Hidden costs in the contract:** Installation fees, router rental, static IP charges, engineer call-out fees, and exit charges that are not transparent from the start indicate a provider focused on extracting revenue rather than building relationships.

The Cheapest Quote Trap

The lowest price almost always comes with trade-offs in SLA quality, support responsiveness, or network resilience. Calculate the cost of one day's downtime to your business — this usually exceeds a full year's price difference between a cheap provider and a reliable one.