Broadband bills set to rise by staggering 10%

New research from internet price comparison website Choose finds 87% of broadband and mobile customers are unaware prices may increase by as much as 10% by April 2022. With annual price rises linked to inflation set to come into force over the coming months, almost half of respondents (46%) did not know prices would be increasing at all.

Although knowledge of mid-contract price rises has improved since Tesco Mobile commissioned research in early 2021 and found 50% were unaware broadband and mobile bills could increase during a contract, 33% of respondents in Choose's survey said they were unaware of this.

The survey also found a significant number of customers are unprepared for the annual round of price rises:

- 1 in 4 (25%) said they would find it financially difficult if their broadband and mobile bill went up by 10%
- 11% said they wouldn't be able to afford a 10% rise in their bills at all

Many broadband and mobile companies use the rate of inflation published in January to set their price increases with big names including BT, O2 and Vodafone adding a percentage to a CPI or RPI rate. However, inflation data published in December 2021 found RPI had reached its highest level since the 1990s to 7.1% and CPI was continuing to soar above the 2% inflation target, reaching 5.1%.

If inflation hits 6% in the upcoming figures, some households could be in line for 10% increases in their broadband and mobile bills at the same time as their finances are squeezed by expected energy bill hikes. This could see consumers paying an extra £111 million each month based on average household spend on broadband bills.

While the regulator guards against inflation-beating price rises that would cause 'material detriment' to customers, these safeguards do not apply when a customer has signed a contract with inflation-beating annual price rises already included. With all but a handful of providers including hefty increases as standard, consumer choice is severely restricted.

Highlighting the seriousness of the situation, Hull incumbent KCOM have recently announced they'll be waiving their contracted CPI + 3.9% increase due to the high living costs people are facing.

Lyndsey Burton, MD of Choose said, "It is time for Ofcom to act again on mid-contract price increases. They have previously brought in regulations specifically to prevent financial hardship, yet their safeguards are failing to protect customers from exactly that.

"The pandemic has demonstrated how reliant we are on broadband and mobile services to keep us connected to each other. Ofcom concede these are 'essential' services and yet they are failing in their duty to support customers' ability to budget for them. As the current economic climate shows, CPI (Consumer Price Index) and RPI (Retail Price Index) linked prices are difficult to plan for and customers will only get a few months' notice before inflation-beating price rises are implemented.

"Broadband contracts are usually between 12 and 24 months in length, with many customers signing up to 18-month deals. Surely it is fair and reasonable to expect providers to fix their prices completely during the contract period to ensure customers know where they stand financially until the contract runs out.

"Ofcom either needs to ban mid-contract price hikes completely or, at the very least, they must set a cap that more fairly distributes inflationary costs.

"With little time for regulatory changes however, I hope we see more providers following in the footsteps of KCOM and waiving their annual rises in the coming months."

PC hardware increases pandemic misery

As if rising broadband costs weren't bad enough, another recent poll shows that almost half (45%) of UK employees were left frustrated with laptops and hardware not functioning properly while working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, with more than a third (35%) of workers experiencing difficulties while transitioning from work to home to hybrid due to technological problems, according to new research by Apogee, an HP company and multi-brand provider of managed workplace services.

Polling 2,000 office workers in the UK, the study reveals IT departments are struggling to keep up with the changing hybrid workforce and faulty technology is leaving businesses ill-equipped to support the flexible future of working, also finding that:

- Nearly one in five (19%) workers didn't know who to ask about IT issues when working from home
- When asked how their company's IT solutions could improve, a quarter (25%) of workers want a more responsive IT team, 24% wish for better facilities and more advanced hardware
- 87% of employees aged 16-24 would make changes to their company's IT, highlighting the need for organisations to better prepare for tomorrow's workforce.

With the pandemic still causing lockdowns and service interruptions for workers and consumers alike, the increased cost of broadband and inefficient hardware signals 2022 is not going to be any easier than 2021, or 2020 for that matter.

Aurelio Maruggi, CEO of Apogee, commented: "Workplace technology must be built to adapt to the changing working environment, yet our study shows that many companies don't have the necessary solutions or teams in place to meet employee demands. A new generation of tech-savvy workers will expect more from their employers, and businesses must be ready to deliver these changes."

The study also revealed the costly impact of workplace IT problems and the resulting downtime. During the pandemic, UK workers lost an average of 85 hours to faulty technology and a lack of IT support while working from home. The resulting loss of worktime is estimated to have cost UK businesses £115 million each week.

"Businesses cannot afford to keep losing money with downtime and poor solutions", Maruggi continued. "As hybrid working models continue to define the future of work, organisations should outsource their workplace service supplier to ensure the coming months and years are productive and profitable."

Loss of worktime calculation based on the following:

- 28 million employees in the UK according to ONS: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/employmentintheuk/august2020
- 25.9% workers did some homeworking according to ONS: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/coronavirusandhomeworkingintheuk/april2020
- Therefore 25.9% of 28m = estimated 7,252,000 remote workers
- 1.79 hours lost per worker per week on average x 7,252,000 = 12.98m
- National min wage £8.91 x 12.98m = 115m

As One Door Closes…

The Digital Secretary has announced 2G and 3G will be phased out by 2033 under plans to help bring in new telecoms suppliers to build the UK's 5G networks.

- Forms part of UK's £50 million package to boost innovation in mobile network technology
- The measures are a key step in providing nationwide security and resilience
- Comes as the Culture Secretary travels to the US to discuss future cooperation on telecoms, tech and data with US counterparts

The announcement follows the recent introduction of the Telecommunications Security Act and forms part of the government's £250 million strategy to build a more competitive, innovative and diverse supply chain for telecoms, to reduce the world's over-reliance on a few equipment makers. The UK and the US are united in their mission to resolve this global issue.

The plans will free up spectrum - the radio waves used for sending and receiving information - to allow for the mass rollout of 5G and other future networks such as 6G which will help create huge possibilities for people's lives. These technologies will help power driverless vehicles and drones, immersive virtual and augmented reality experiences, as well as innovations in tech to achieve Net Zero and improve healthcare. The hyper-fast speeds of 5G will also revolutionise internet accessibility on the go.

The government's £200 million 5G Testbeds and Trials programme is already seeing next-generation networks transform industries - from smart farming to immersive reality experiences to enhancing the UK's top tourist destinations and 5G buoys helping coastguards save lives at sea.

The new plans include a joint ambition for 35 per cent of the UK's mobile network traffic to be carried over Open RAN by 2030, £36 million in funding for fifteen projects to trial the technology across Scotland, Wales and England, and a £15 million cash injection for the SONIC prototype testing facility for next-generation telecoms tech.

Phil Sorsky, Senior Vice President International at CommScope told Broadband, "I think that shutting down 2G/3G is a good idea that will free up the spectrum for more advanced uses, be that people or machines. Voice communication will evolve anyway to become just another service application delivered over the underlying digital bearer services provided by the 4G (VoLTE/VoIP) and 5G networks.

He went on: "The 'older' networks like 2G and 3G are more to do with machines than people talking; many of the old EPOS terminals in retail and restaurants used 2G as their way to connect to the card issuer like Visa and MasterCard that have very old 2G or 3G SIM cards inside. So, the inconvenience is more for these installed bases of devices rather than your elderly relatives not being able to use their phones."

Hamish MacLeod, Director of Mobile UK, said: "Mobile UK and its members welcome the government's statement. Switching off 2G and 3G will enable operators to transition fully to more energy efficient and high capacity networks to the benefit of customers. We are also working with government and wider industry to support the maturity of new RAN solutions to open up further opportunities for innovation and new services in the future.

"IoT has in many applications replaced the need for machine-to-machine communication, so there really is little need to continue the old 2G and 3G networks; and 2033 is still a long way off."

Virgin Media O2 confirms no EU roaming charges for customers

The new year had barely started when Virgin Media O2 has announced it will not be reintroducing roaming fees in Europe, making it the only big four mobile network in the UK not to bring back these charges. They will maintain inclusive roaming in Europe, using data, calls and texts just as they would in the UK.

It is fortunate timing and a clever manoeuvre by the operator. Travel testing rules have now started to relax, sparking a boom in travel bookings, so this will be welcome for weary homeworkers looking for some European sun but don't want to pay the earth calling home while on the beach.

A recent survey carried out by Virgin Media O2 backed up this sentiment, showing British people have strong travel intentions in 2022. By this summer the majority (75%) of people surveyed expect to travel abroad - and a majority expect to do so more this year than they did in 2021.

Analysis of daily charge rates from other providers suggests that a family of four going abroad for two weeks could see £100 or more added to their holiday bill when using their phones each day.

Gareth Turpin, Chief Commercial Officer, Mobile, at Virgin Media O2, said: "We're starting the year by giving our customers some certainty: we will not be reintroducing roaming fees in Europe for customers on O2 or Virgin Mobile.

"Unlike all the other major mobile networks who are bringing back roaming fees, we will not be following suit. With many Brits now looking to plan a trip abroad, we've got our customers covered and extra roaming charges will be one less thing to worry about."

Virgin Media and O2 came together in June 2021 with a clear ambition to be a customer-first business and the biggest telecoms challenger in the market. The decision not to reintroduce EU roaming fees demonstrates this and builds on a solid 6 months of momentum. From rolling out gigabit broadband speeds and 5G, to launching Volt - the company's first joint bundles - in just four months, Virgin Media O2 has made great strides forward with much more planned in 2022.

Broadband Journal covered this development last year when three of the four networks announced a return to roaming charges within weeks of each other, and only months after the UK left the EU. The UK gritted its teeth, mindful this was what leaving the EU meant. Whether 02 and Virgin will see some renewed competition as a result of this surprise announcement however remains to be seen.

Provider	Comes into effect	Applies to customers who joined / upgraded after	Daily charge	Alternatives / notes
EE	TBC March 2022	7th July 2021	£2 a day	Customers can pay £10 a month for Roam Abroad add on
Vodafone	TBC end Jan 2022	11th August 2021	£2 a day	£1 a day for 8-day or 15-day pass
Three	23rd May 2022	1st October 2021	£2 a day	None available
O2	No change	No change	N/A	Can use existing data allowance up to 25GB.

STL commits to net-zero emissions by 2030, strengthens sustainability focus

Industry-leading integrator of digital networks STL today announced its commitment to achieve net-zero emissions by 2030. As STL drives digital networks of the future, it is accelerating its efforts towards net-zero manufacturing and sustainable network build strategies.

Recently, at the COP26 Summit, nations discussed the importance of urgent climate action. They have committed to reducing emissions and limiting the average annual temperature rise to 1.5^{O}. According to estimates, the Internet and supporting network components account for 3.7% of global greenhouse emissions.

As a global technology company, creating digital networks that are green and sustainable is very much at the forefront of its ambitions. To that end STL has outlined a 10-year roadmap to deliver on its commitment towards its sustainability and social aims and contribute to achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

- Net-zero emissions in manufacturing facilities by 2030 - STL has been mitigating carbon emissions from its manufacturing plants and has set a goal for net-zero emissions by 2030
- 100% plants Zero Waste to Landfill certified by 2030 - STL is the first in the industry to get 'Zero Waste to Landfill' (ZWL) certification for its Indian manufacturing facilities. Recently, STL has achieved a landfill diversion rate of 99.97% for its Rakholi plant
- 100% sustainable sourcing - Over the last few years, STL has been sourcing sustainable raw materials for packaging, transitioning to a green supply chain
- Water positivity by 2030 - STL recycled over 1,41,000 m^3 of water at its manufacturing facilities and harvested another 4,000+ m^3 through rainwater harvesting structures. By 2030, it aims to become 100% water positive across all its manufacturing locations

Akanksha Sharma, Global Head ESG at STL took time out to tell Broadband Journal about their recent announcement which forms only a part of their overall corporate responsibility and sustainability plans. Was this announcement a stand-alone response to COP26 or does this form part of a more long-term initiative?

"STL has always been committed towards ESG and is creating greener networks without any external triggers," she told Broadband. "Our priority impact areas have always been environment conservation, healthcare, education and empowerment of women. Our ambitions are very clearly charted out and closely linked to the United Nations' sustainable development goals."

This is certainly impressive, but there are announcements like this frequently in the press. A lot of good publicity is generated at the time of course, but Broadband was curious. How is all this measured? Will STL be making their progress public? Akanksha nodded. "Yes, we are signatories to the UN Global Compact, where we publish our annual disclosures. This is also aligned to Global Reporting Initiative, the universally-accepted standard on sustainability and ESG."

Clearly passionate about sustainability and STL's varied achievements, she told Broadband, "We are the world's first integrated optical-fibre and cable manufacturer which is zero waste-to-landfill certified. And I say this - it gives me immense pleasure - because we collaborate with other industries, and we came up with the whole idea of circularity and put it into practice, where we are co-processing the waste generated from manufacturing by conversion to energy."

These days it is a foolish company that doesn't broadcast its corporate responsibility statement early on; millennial customers, having grown up with a strong social conscience, will vote with their feet and go elsewhere before you can say zero carbon emissions. The world has changed a lot; as recently as 15 years ago companies were still being labelled new-age cranks for announcing well-meaning initiatives about the environment. Such positive change is welcome but from a PR perspective it is not easy to stand out from your competitors when all of you are doing the same - albeit laudable - thing.

Sharma explained that their competitors are matching some of these efforts, but according to estimates, the Internet and supporting network components account for nearly 3.7% of global greenhouse emissions. Clearly there is a huge collective responsibility to tackle this issue. She agreed.

"In addition to all of this we are actively working on the social impact and community efforts," she said. "So we have transformed everyday living for about 1.4 million people. This includes work on digital inclusion, and a whole range of solutions that are around EdTech initiatives that aim to provide better education solutions to marginalised children. Our education and healthcare system got badly disrupted because of COVID, not just in India, but everywhere, and in rural pockets of India, children are just not getting any support.

Sharma added, "STL are running a community educator program with American India Foundation, providing rural possibilities of enabling education at the last mile, which is what we stand for."

This is certainly beyond the realms of responsibility for many corporations, but Sharma hadn't finished. "We also have programs on healthcare, again, leveraging technology and for women, we offer skilling, market readiness and placements to women. Lastly, on the environment, we are not just working within our business influence, but also a lot of work is being done on conservation with the World Bank's WRG2030 team on building water resilience in the communities.

Essentially, STL's various initiatives are put together not because of external triggers, but as a proactive call in response to unprecedented world events. Regarding sustainability announcements, STL's particular approach concerns working closely with others in their supply chain to maximise results in addition to their own internal efforts. "I think that is a big commitment by any business; I actually get very closely involved while working with some of our suppliers. And a lot of them are small scale and medium scale suppliers, and it's really hard looking at the challenges in the ecosystem to keep them motivated about carbon, water, resourcing and so on."

The message from STL is about collaboration; the company's mission to achieve net zero emissions, 100% sustainable resourcing and water positivity are only achievable, they say, through working across the value chain. "What really differentiates us is that we also work very closely with our business partners up and down the stream," Sharma explained. "It's evident now that institutions and organisations cannot just walk the walk individually, we need to bring our business partners with us. This is what I believe in, and this is what our organisation does."

It would be interesting to see how their partners' efforts are measured, and by what metric, and how public their results are made. This remains vague. In conclusion, how do those initiatives actually translate on the ground? "I'll just share one instance, when a lot of people last year during the pandemic in India were losing their jobs, we were talking to some of our social program beneficiaries to find out how they were getting on. There was a woman in a very remote location of Maharashtra and she told us 'I'm still able to earn seven to 8,000 Rupees a month, and feed my kids, because of your skilling, I'm making and placing my products on Amazon.' That is real empowerment, that amidst all of this, people are able to take care of their families. That is very reassuring."

For more information, see www.stl.tech

HbbTV: Standard for the TV world of tomorrow

"HbbTV has become a mature and recognised specification in the TV market," announced Vincent Grivet, Chairman of the HbbTV Association, in his closing remarks at the 9th HbbTV Symposium and Awards. In late November 180 experts from Europe, the USA and Asia met in Paris for the summit of the Connected TV industry. HbbTV now includes major global market players such as Google, Amazon and Discovery, an indication of the continuing important role the association plays and its mission in 2022. In the meantime, as an internationally recognised standard it has become widely adopted in most European TV markets.

Over the course of the two-day event we saw the introduction of HbbTV offers, commercial applications for targeted advertising, best practice examples for HbbTV OpApps, innovations in HbbTV apps and the role of standardisation and insights from the USA. The main focus was on current market developments and future expectations for HbbTV.

Linear TV is not dying out

People have been predicting the death of linear TV for years but it is clearly not happening. Kicking off the day, Paul Gray, Senior Research Manager Consumer Electronics at market researcher Omdia, outlined key developments across international TV markets.

According to Gray, linear TV has remained stable during the pandemic in terms of viewing time in key international markets. As expected, streaming services recorded growth of 100% or more, particularly in Italy, France and the UK. Competition between operating systems remains intense. Android, Tizen, Fire TV, Firefox and Roku are all jostling for position and all have a presence in local TV markets.

Tizen sets the tone everywhere - except for China and Japan, where Samsung does not sell Smart TVs. Things are reaching saturation point now, where there are some 300 streaming services worldwide, all battling with each other for a limited number of viewers with a limited amount of income and viewing time available.

In the highly fragmented worlds of linear TV and OTT, HbbTV plays an important role and helps disseminate this fragmentation. The HbbTV standard co-exists well alongside this shift and is able to continually reinvent itself in a demand-driven, hybrid world, Grivet said. Current market developments would seem to suggest this.

That's because more and more broadcasters in Europe are actively rebuilding their business models as competition intensifies, relying on and establishing their own streaming offerings. SALTO in France with public and private providers is just one example. We are seeing an exponential rise in viewers and usage as the adoption of HbbTV increases, Grivet concluded.

We can't afford to rest on our laurels however. The HbbTV standard must be prepared to continually evolve as the landscape inevitably shifts from a broadcast world to an IP one.