

THE NEED FOR SPEED



New government investment could make slow internet access a thing of the past in France, which is good news for homeowners, as **Bob Elliott** explains



It seems that broadband has never been more important whether you're moving to or within France, so it pays to find out what service you can get before you commit to a property purchase.

With the steady move towards shopping and banking online, and keeping in touch with those close to you through Skype and social media, many people feel totally cut off without what is a relatively new means of communication.

Making sure you are house-hunting in areas where there is a broadband service that will meet your minimum needs is quite easy, but first you need to decide if you want to limit yourself to web browsing and emails, or if you want to watch videos and TV programmes. The slowest speed that you will see is 0.5Mbps, which is poor and unreliable at peak times of internet use as all domestic services are 'contended', meaning that you share access with others locally. For those with basic requirements, a minimum speed of 1Mbps is all that is needed. However we have seen a dramatic increase in the demand for ever faster broadband, and if a home does not have this it will impact on its value.

WATCH YOUR SPEED

Checking broadband speed is easy (providing you have access to the internet). When trying to narrow down your property search area, the website observatoire.francethd.fr shows general broadband coverage for anywhere in France. If you've found a house you want to buy, go to degroupeptest.com and enter the number of the telephone line at the property and you will get an accurate speed indication. If there is no telephone line installed, you can enter the number of the nearest property. It will not be completely accurate but will give a good indication of what you can expect.

The results of these tests may be disappointing, especially if you are searching in rural areas where there are longer distances between properties and the local exchange. This year is likely to see some big changes in areas where speeds are slower because from late 2018, all telecom companies will no longer be able to offer the standard line rental and broadband service, and all calls will go over the broadband service. All telecom companies are given advanced notice of when a local exchange is going to be upgraded, so before striking a property off your list, do check with your preferred provider to see if the service is going to be improved soon.

A TIME FOR CHANGE

The speed available depends on the distance between the local exchange and the property. Much of the equipment in these exchanges is 40 years old and simply not appropriate for today's and tomorrow's needs. To address this, in 2013 the French government announced a plan to roll out high-speed internet, *réseau très haut débit* (THD), across the whole of France by 2022, and President Macron has

KEY FIGURES

- An estimated 7.5 million people in France do not have high-speed internet access
- Some 500,000 residents in 1,620 *communes* have no internet access at all
- 340 *communes* are not on the mobile phone network
- Only 1% of residents in Dordogne or Creuse have access to high-speed internet compared to 90% of residents in Paris

said that he wants this deadline to be brought forward to 2020.

However, a survey by consumer group UFC Que Choisir has estimated that the roll-out is at least 10 years behind schedule and that full implementation of the programme will not be achieved until 2035. As the roll-out of this investment is starting with larger towns with government buildings, hospitals, schools, etc, rural areas will be the last to benefit.

The major upgrade of the national network will see changes affecting larger towns first, then smaller ones with fibre connections becoming available but at a higher cost. With seven and a half million homes in France unable to access high-speed internet, these improvements cannot come soon enough. There will also be upgrades of local exchanges that will continue until 2022, with faster broadband being made available to many, however small and rural *communes* may not benefit.

One possible solution will be to bring faster speed to rural areas by linking their telephone and broadband services to the mobile network, which may be possible due to the big investment in the 3G and 4G networks. Trials are also being held in

TOP TIP

"A new website is expected to be set up by mid-2018 which would allow households in France without good internet speeds to register and claim aid of up to €150 to fit the equipment needed to improve their service."

Emma Rawle,
Digital Editor

five major French towns to develop the 5G network but this may not become available to rural areas for some time.

From 2019 it will not be possible to order a new analogue telephone line and all calls will be carried by the broadband service. Where the line speed is too slow to carry broadband, some companies will carry the service via a SIM on the mobile network while keeping 90% of the fixed line functions. By 2022 all existing analogue lines will be converted to the new service. Others have yet to advise on their solutions.

So, if you are already connected you may wish to contact your telecom company and ask if you can be upgraded now, and if not, when the improved service will become available in your area. Telecom providers all have advanced information about these changes before it becomes publicly available, so it is worth checking. Nothing is more certain than that there will be big changes in the services available over the next three years, so do make sure that you don't miss out. **LF**

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GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR INTERNET CONNECTION

SET THINGS UP CORRECTLY FROM THE OUTSET

When you set up a new service, do remember to have any services included from the outset. There is no point in asking to be ex-directory (*liste rouge*) after the service has gone live as your details will already be in the public domain. There are a number of free services that you can choose, such as withholding your number, and others that cost €1/month which include call waiting among others. If you don't want to receive unsolicited sales calls, go to bloctel.gouv.fr where you can register to prevent call centres troubling you.

You will also be able to choose between a number of call packages and if you make a lot of calls these are excellent value for money. Do remember that the main French companies design their offers for the main population, so international calls, especially those to overseas marketing numbers can be expensive.

If you are already a property owner in France and are moving locally, you may be able to keep your telephone number, and similarly if you are staying put but want to use a different provider you can keep your number by obtaining a special code. Dial 3179 from your own telephone line and you will be given a code to pass to your new provider, or alternatively you can ask your current provider to obtain this number for you.

MAXIMISE YOUR WIFI SIGNAL

The location you choose for your modem can make a big difference to the strength of the wifi signal you can receive. Microwaves and white goods reduce signal quality so kitchens are best avoided, while TVs and mirrors close by will also have an adverse effect. Ideally you should place the modem as high up as possible as wifi signals are sent out radially and downwards, and switch off any devices not being used as each one will slow down the service a little. If the speed drops at peak usage time your

wifi channel might be congested, and your provider can help you change to a channel that is less busy.

If your property has a lot of thick stone walls or metal in its construction, you may have to use wifi extenders to take the signal into some areas. They are relatively inexpensive and widely available to buy.

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

There is a lot of equipment between your property and the person you want to connect with, so there is considerable scope for parts of the service to fail. Getting back online quickly will depend on the quality of the technical support your provider gives.

They will start by wanting to eliminate failure of any equipment in your home, so will ask you to undertake some tests. If these are not done and an engineer is sent out then you may be liable to pay for their wasted time! If this establishes that it is a network problem then engineers will be asked to investigate and repair the fault.

The engineers work independently of all the telecom companies to prevent preferential treatment to any of them. Although the loss of your broadband service may seem catastrophic, a domestic service will see most faults repaired within three or four days. If you want a quicker response you will need to subscribe to a business service with the associated higher costs – very few do.

MAKING A COMPLAINT

You have access to consumer protection if you are dissatisfied with your service. The ARCEP (Autorité de Régulation des Communications Électroniques et des Postes) is the equivalent to the UK's OFCOM. Naturally all complaints have to be in French and if they are not serious they may not be given a high priority. You will, in any event, have had to exhaust the complaints procedure provided by your provider. Do remember that all telecom companies make no money from a service that is not working so they are already incentivised to fix any problems. Visit arcep.fr for more information.

France's mobile phone operators are to spend €3 billion rolling out a 4G network over the next three years to ensure there are no coverage gaps by 2020. The roll-out would bring 4G coverage to more than 10,000 towns and villages currently served by either 2G or 3G networks

