

<http://www.pocket-lint.com/review/3645/virgin-media-mobile-broadband-review>

Virgin Media Mobile Broadband

Does the "mother of all broadband" do mobile well?

by Amy-Mae Elliott published on 21 November 2008

Virgin Media has jumped onto the mobile broadband bandwagon with the launch of its own Virgin Mobile dongle and service into what's arguably a fairly crowded market. It seems the company hopes to distinguish itself on price, and offers pretty good value deals - to existing Virgin Media customers at least.

Existing cable customers who are on Virgin Media's XL or L broadband packages, or Virgin Media's ADSL "Bundle 1" are being offered mobile broadband - with 1GB data allowance - for £5 a month, possibly the cheapest contract deal currently in the UK.

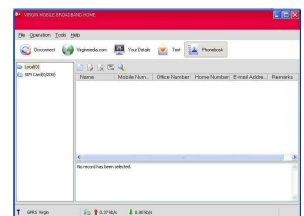
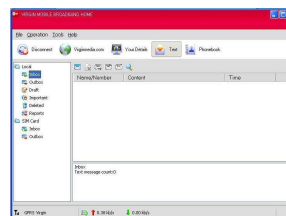
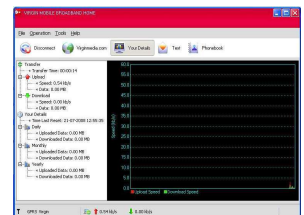
But, for those who do opt for the 1GB bundle, it's worth noting that Virgin charges each GB over a user's limit at £15. Non-Virgin consumers can sign up to 18-month contracts for £15 per month that gives them 3GB data allowance. So is it any good?

The hardware itself is a Huawei E160 stock capable of HSDPA connectivity. It's black with a tactile finish and aside from the Virgin Mobile logo, is indistinguishable from a flash drive.

Although it looks the part, the stick does not offer any memory capacity - although a nice touch is the microSD card slot on the side that's capable of taking memory cards so that you can store data on the device.

Aside from the card slot, the other notable features of the stick itself is an external antenna jack and a "hidden" LED light that's worth noting as it will offer clues as to the connectivity status of the device.

The stick flashes different colours, and at different speeds, depending on whether there is a 3G, GSM/GPRS connection for at a glance reference.



...cont.

There are six different flashing options that mean one thing or another and although memorising this list did not appeal, we think after prolonged use, users would get used to the meaning of the different flashes and it might prove a quick way to check status.

Although by no means bulky, the drive, measuring 13 x 83 x 45mm is supplied with a USB cable adapter, that might prove useful for those with USB ports are close together but also claims to offer a better signal.

Set-up is what you would expect, just insert the SIM card into the stick through a slide-out tray next to the USB connector and plug the USB modem into your PC or laptop.

We installed the device to a laptop running Windows XP. The device is compatible with PCs running Windows 2000, Windows XP, Windows Vista and Mac OS X 10.4.5 and above.

All the set-up software required is on the stick itself, so from then on in, it's really just a matter of following the simple on-screen prompts to get the system sorted. When set-up is complete, a Virgin icon will appear on the computer's homescreen, or can be launched by clicking the relevant drive via My Computer.

The Virgin software is easy to use and although basic, fairly inoffensive. The home page you see gives you the option to connect/disconnect and shows a full set of stats for your usage including up- and downloading info and connection speeds.

Of interest to those with multiple laptops, or for people who want to share the stick, owners can use the USB modem across multiple computers, and Virgin offers an option to keep track of usage by a "Your Account" service at virginmobile.co.uk.

Maximum speeds possible are up to 3.6Mb per

At a glance

What is it?

Mobile broadband

Good

Easy set-up and interface, decent hardware

Bad

Not the fastest speeds available, Virgin's 3G coverage is not the best

Verdict

In all, it's a solid hardware offering with a simple set up, but be sure to check coverage before taking the plunge

Price from &#pound;5

Our score

7/10

Your score

?/10

...cont.

second so the device is not as fast as some offerings from Vodafone - although it's worth considering Voda's claimed 7.2Mbps speeds are very limited geographically.

As well as using the stick for mobile broadband connectivity, users can send texts and store contacts to the stick's SIM card. Texting, with messages written and sent within the Virgin software, works for up to 20 people and costs 10p per message, while up to 200 contacts can be stored in the phone book and saved to the SIM.

VERDICT

In all, it's a solid hardware offering with a simple set-up. We think this would be particularly of interest and good value to Virgin Media customers who qualify for the £5 a month deal, although those users should be aware of the 1GB data cap. Virgin Mobile says its 3G network covers over 85% of the UK population, but a look at their online coverage checker to look at the actual coverage maps (rather than a population percentage) is a good idea before you take the plunge of signing up to a contract.