

Metrics for the UK independent network sector

Results from spring 2019 survey

POINT. topic

May 2019

A Point Topic report for INCA

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1. Summary

Premises passed or addressed

- The UK's independent network operators are estimated to have passed or addressed over 1.29 million homes and businesses with fixed superfast or ultrafast broadband networks at end-2018¹
- Totalling 1,298,000, the majority, but not all of this coverage, uses ultrafast fibre-to-the-premises or home (FTTP/H) and fibre-to-the-building (FTTB) technology
- Fixed wireless access (FWA) networks are estimated to cover over two million premises²
- In total the UK's independent broadband infrastructure providers are estimated to pass or address nearly 3.32 million premises.

Live connections

- There are 297,000 live connections to superfast and ultrafast fixed networks provided by independent operators, up by 43 per cent year-on-year
- There are an estimated 110,000 live connections to independent FWA infrastructure, an increase of over nine per cent year-on-year
- In total independent operators accounted for an estimated 407,000 live connections at end-2018, up 32 per cent on 2017.

Expectations and aspirations

- Fixed superfast or ultrafast infrastructure supplied by independent operators is expected to reach around 3.38 million premises at the end of 2020 with an estimated 677,000 live connections
- In 2025 operators aspire to cover 15.96 million homes and business passed, with around 4.83 million live connections
- These expectations include double counting if and where networks overbuild one another.

Investment

- Private sector investment announcements totalling £3.36 billion have been made within the past year relating to independent networks
- This does not represent the entire market (and excludes prospective investment in FibreNation)
- Large and mid-sized operators continue to see interest from the investment community.

Concerns

- Planning and street works delays and/or costs, delivery times from Openreach and other operators, and overbuild are the top three concerns for independent network operators
- Using Passive Infrastructure Access from Openreach ranks fourth in this year's list
- Access to cost-effective backhaul services and engaging with developers and/or local authorities on new build housing plans have both moved down the list of key concerns
- In addition, there is general concern in the industry about access to labour with suitable skills in a post-Brexit environment.

¹ Operators' reporting varies in terms of what constitutes 'passed' and 'addressed'; this total therefore includes some differences on the definition of premises passed and addressed.

² The fixed wireless access (FWA) market is more difficult to assess due to line of sight issues and fragmented supply in the sector.

2. Introduction

This report provides an overview of the UK's independent network operator sector as of end-2018 and early 2019 in terms of scale, coverage, ambitions and concerns. It includes both fixed and fixed wireless network operators, and follows on from last year's survey and report.

It has been produced in partnership between INCA – the Independent Networks Cooperative Association – and Point Topic, drawing on input from both INCA members and non-members.

Basis for research

In compiling these statistics, Point Topic has relied heavily on self-reporting by network operators. When numbers are unknown, we have used our own estimates including postcode data if available.

INCA members were surveyed during January to April 2019. Survey questions can be found at <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/independent-networks-survey-2019> and in Appendix A.

The report also draws on Point Topic's continuing Superfast & Ultrafast Broadband Update and Broadband Geography research programmes, which have been gathering information and datasets since June 2009. This research is used particularly in assessing expansion in recent years of the independent network operator footprint.

Research aims

By gathering information on coverage in terms of premises passed and premises addressed, live connection numbers, expansion plans and key concerns on an aggregated basis, it is hoped the independent sector will be better able to demonstrate to policy makers, Ofcom, investors and the media, the role it is playing and advances it is making in bringing superfast and ultrafast broadband to UK homes and businesses. The aim is to ensure independent operators continue to be recognised and supported.

Definitions

- Independent operator (also known as altnet) – we define this as an organisation deploying broadband infrastructure for wholesale and/or retail use, which is not part of either of the UK's incumbent operators BT Group or KCOM in Kingston upon Hull, and that is not Virgin Media as the national cable operator. This includes community groups, not-for-profit organisations, and privately funded companies.
- Technologies – in terms of fixed networks, we cover fibre-based network deployments including fibre-to-the-cabinet (FTTC), fibre-to-the-premises or home (FTTP/H) and fibre-to-the-building (FTTB). We also cover cable infrastructure (Docsis 3.0). Fixed wireless access (FWA) deployments are included where we have been able to gain information. This report does not cover satellite, 4G, white space or leased line infrastructure.
- Bandwidth – we cover next-generation broadband infrastructure capable of offering bandwidths of 30Mbps download or above. However, coverage of FWA technology includes sub-superfast bandwidth. The industry now widely refers to 100Mbps download and above as ultrafast. Ultrafast is defined as 100Mbps by the European Commission and the UK Government. Ofcom however, defines ultrafast as 300Mbps or more.
- Premises passed and addressed – Point Topic defines premises passed as those that can readily order a broadband service. However we recognise there are varying definitions and

different terms. Premises addressed tends to be classed as a home or business located within x number of metres of a network.

- Connections – live connections we define as premises which have an active subscription/s to a broadband service. We include both residential and business, wholesale and retail but without double counting of these figures.

Next steps

We aim to continue this survey and report on a regular basis in order to follow changes in the market, track advances in coverage and scale, as well as understand new issues and concerns within the independent community as they arise.

The survey attached to it has been completed this year by 16 independent network operators forming a representative sample of the UK independent sector. Our thanks go to all those who have taken part in the survey.

As mentioned above, we rely to a large extent on self-reported statistics to assess the scale of the sector in terms of premises covered and live connections. In order to increase the rigorousness of data we will continue to work with INCA and the industry to agree on metrics and outputs, including definitions.

The FWA market in particular requires further research in order to better assess coverage and customer base.

3. Key metrics

The following infographic provides a snapshot of the UK independent network operator sector at the end of 2018.

METRICS FOR THE UK INDEPENDENT NETWORK SECTOR

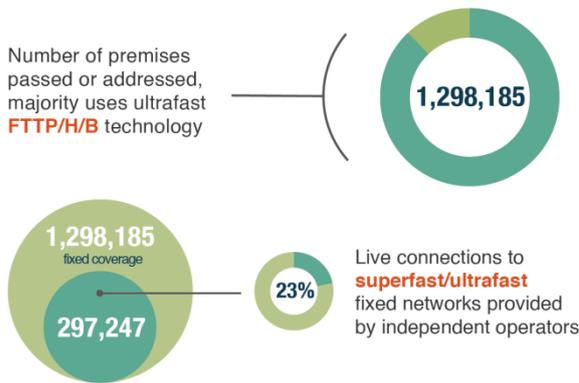
Estimates by Point Topic Ltd based on INCA survey data and Point Topic's own research

An overview of the UK's independent network operator sector as of end-2018 and early 2019 including both fixed and wireless operators.

OVER 1 MLN premises within reach of an **ultrafast** independent broadband network today



ESTIMATES FOR UK'S FIXED NETWORKS AT THE END OF 2018

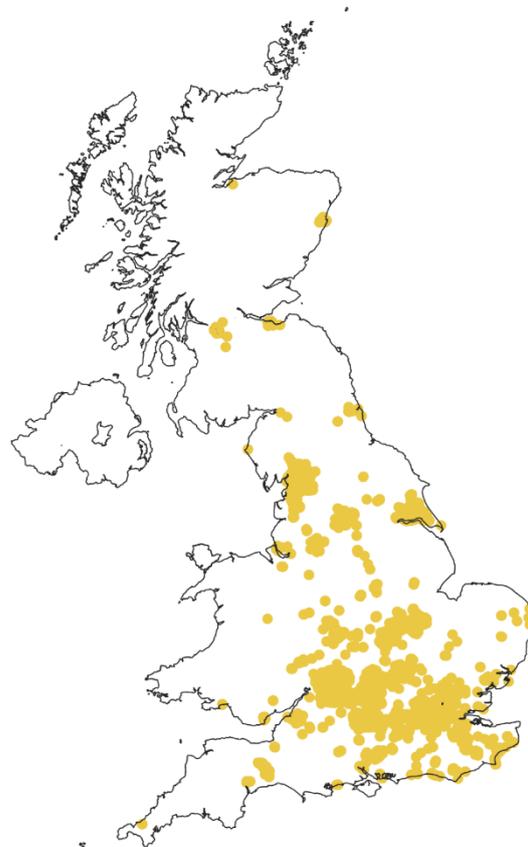


ESTIMATES FOR UK'S FIXED WIRELESS ACCESS (FWA) NETWORKS AT THE END OF 2018

OVER 2 MLN premises could be covered by **FWA** independent operators



Independent operators' fixed network footprint at the end of December 2018



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4. Assessing scale and ambitions of the independent network sector

Point Topic provides estimates of premises passed or addressed by the UK's independent operators and live connections for the end of December 2018. We have split these into fixed and fixed wireless access infrastructure.

We also collect expectations and aspirations for some (not all) of these numbers at the end of 2020, and into 2025.

These estimates are based on public announcements, survey data supplemented by Point Topic research as outlined above, either reported to us by network operators or using our own estimates when actual numbers are unavailable.

Table 1 below contains estimated key metrics for the UK's independent fixed superfast and ultrafast, and FWA broadband sectors.

Premises covered by fixed superfast and ultrafast networks

At end-December 2018, the UK's independent network operators are estimated to have passed or addressed over 1.29 million premises with their fixed broadband infrastructure. This is an increase of 30 per cent year-on-year.

The vast majority uses ultrafast FTTP/H and FTTB technology.

Without counting "addressable" premises, the independent sector passes 1.1 million premises with fixed superfast and ultrafast infrastructure.

Premises with superfast and ultrafast fixed connections

Live connections for independent operators stood at an estimated 297,000 at the end of December 2018. This is an increase of 43 per cent year-on-year.

Premises passed by FWA networks

Independent FWA infrastructure is estimated to have just over two million premises at the end of December 2018. This Point Topic estimate is based on a take-up assumption of 5.4 per cent.

Premises connected by FWA networks

Live connections over independent network operators' FWA infrastructure were an estimated 110,000 at the end of December 2018.

Total independent network coverage and connections

We estimate that the total independent sector using fixed and FWA technologies in the UK accounted for 3.3 million premises passed or addressed at the end-December 2018, and 3.1 million premises passed. Independent operators between them had an estimated 407,000 live connections.

Expectations for end-2020

We asked survey respondents to provide an indication of how many premises passed and live connections they expected to have at end-December 2020. Several have also given public indications of their future coverage aims. These are summarised in Table 2 below.

When combining those who responded to our survey with public announcements, the total is 3.38 million premises passed or addressed, and 677,000 connections at the end of 2020 for fixed superfast and ultrafast infrastructure.

However, this does not take account of overbuild, which is likely to grow for independent networks operators as their coverage footprints expand (see page 16 below).

Aspirations for 2025

We asked operators to give an idea of their aspirations for 2025 in terms of premises passed and live connections. We have also used public announcements and Point Topic research to arrive at estimates. These put targets for premises passed at 15.96 million and connections at 4.83 million for 2025 for fixed ultrafast infrastructure. This contains double counting of premises where footprints overlap.

For comparison our survey last year put the 2025 target figures at 14.25 million for premises passed and 4.8 million connections for 2025 for fixed ultrafast infrastructure.

Again this is not based on the whole independent network operator market but it does include the largest players.

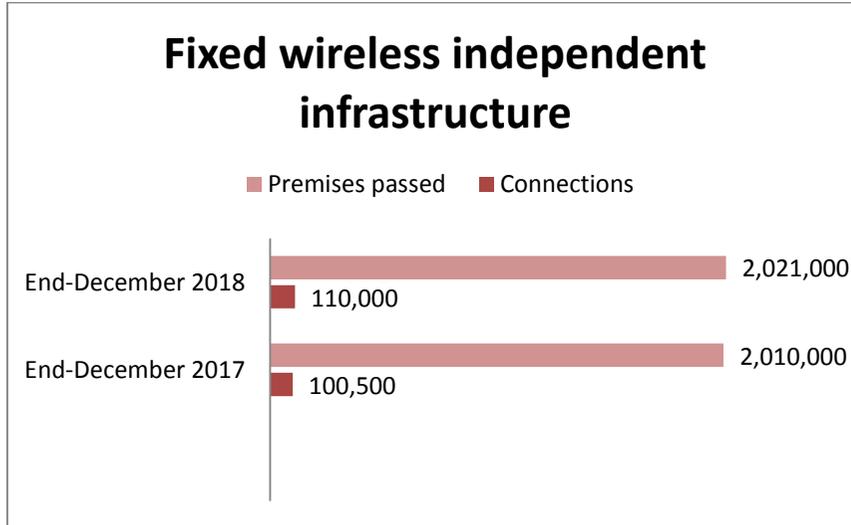
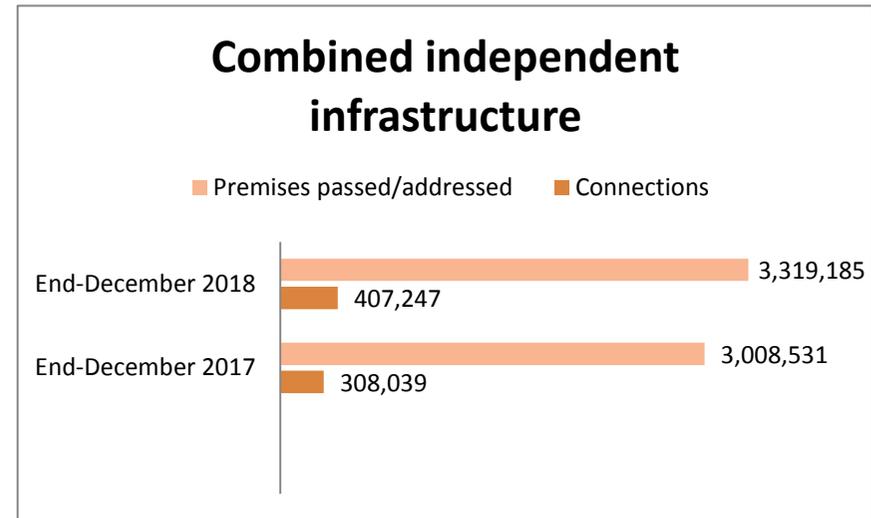
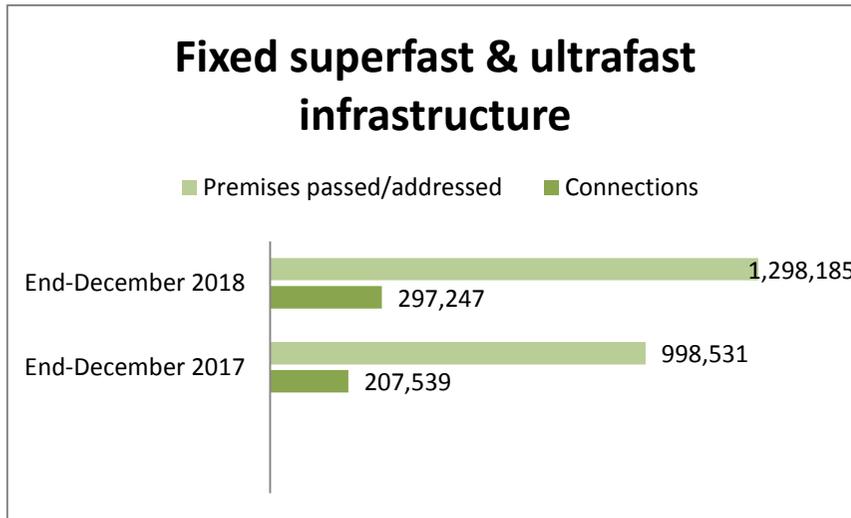
Unfortunately there is still too little information available in the market for us to provide any figures for the fixed wireless sector on this basis.

Table 1: Estimated key metrics for UK independent network sector

FIXED SUPERFAST & ULTRAFAST INFRASTRUCTURE		
Total for fixed superfast and ultrafast operators	Connections	Premises passed/addressed
End-December 2017	207,539	998,531
End-December 2018	297,247	1,298,185
FIXED WIRELESS ACCESS INFRASTRUCTURE		
Total for FWA operators	Connections	Premises passed
End-December 2017	100,500	2,010,000
End-December 2018	110,000	2,021,000
COMBINED INDEPENDENT NETWORK INFRASTRUCTURE		
Independent sector fixed and FWA	Connections	Premises passed/addressed
End-December 2017	308,039	3,008,531
End-December 2018	407,247	3,319,185
EXPECTATIONS & ASPIRATIONS (April 2019)		
FIXED SUPERFAST & ULTRAFAST INFRASTRUCTURE		
	Connections	Premises passed/addressed
End-December 2020	677,214	3,387,277
Aspirations for 2025	4,383,999	15,963,898

Source: INCA survey, Point Topic research and estimates

Figure 1: Key data changes from 2018 to 2019 INCA surveys



Fixed independent superfast & ultrafast infrastructure		Year-on-year
Premises passed/addressed		30.01%
Connections		43.22%
Fixed wireless independent infrastructure		Year-on-year
Premises passed/addressed		0.55%
Connections		9.45%
Combined independent infrastructure		Year-on-year
Premises passed/addressed		10.33%
Connections		32.21%

Table 2: Public expansion announcements by selected independent network operators

Operator	Plans	Date announced
Airband	Aim to pass an additional 50,000 premises by 2021 using mix of fibre and wireless	7 August 2018
British Fibre Networks	Planning to serve over 35 per cent of UK new build homes by 2020; has signed up 24,000 new homes with 50 housing developers	10 November 2018
CityFibre	One million UK homes in 12 towns and cities within four years, with potential to extend this to up to five million UK homes by 2025	9 November 2017
Community Fibre	Full fibre connectivity to a further 100,000 homes by 2019, covering social and private housing estates across London; target of connecting 500,000 homes in London by 2022	23 April 2018/20 March 2018
County Broadband	Expansion in East of England with aim to service more than 30,000 premises in next phase of development	12 June 2018
Gigaclear	Target of connecting 500,000 premises by 2024	9 April 2019
G.Network	Rollout out to 120,000 business and residential premises	5 November 2018
Hyperoptic	Bringing forward target of two million homes passed to 2021 (from 2022 previously). Another three million homes, bringing total to five million homes, will be passed by 2024 (from 2025 previously); aspiration for five million by 2025	7 November 2018
Lightning Fibre	Reported aim to deliver around 50,000 properties passed within the next three years	22 March 2019
Nextgenaccess	Plans to deploy over 1,000km of new high capacity fibre routes across the UK by end-2020 and open up ultrafast connectivity to over 4,000 underserved businesses along South Wales to Southwest England route	26 October 2018
TalkTalk Group	New company FibreNation to rollout full fibre broadband to three million homes and businesses. Building on York trial, next three towns will be Harrogate, Ripon and Knaresborough taking total footprint to over 100,000 premises	21 November 2018
toob	Fibre network to more than 100,000 premises by end-2021 with ambition to pass more than one million homes and business premises over next 10 years	25 March 2019
TrueSpeed	To pass up to 75,000 homes and businesses in the South West region	11 July 2017
WightFibre	Over 50,000 homes and businesses across the Isle of Wight/53,000 of the 61,000 homes on the island by end 2022	8 November 2017/22 March 2018

Source: Independent operators, predominantly using FTTP/H/B technology

5. Independent network sector coverage mapping

Point Topic maps broadband provision throughout the UK, including footprints of the country's independent network operators.

As part of the INCA survey we asked independent operators to provide their coverage details. We have also used our own research to provide a view of independent network infrastructure provision today, both for superfast and ultrafast fixed networks and for FWA networks. Figures 2 to 6 provide more detail.

Figure 2: Fixed independent operator presence in UK at end-2015, 2016, 2017, 2018

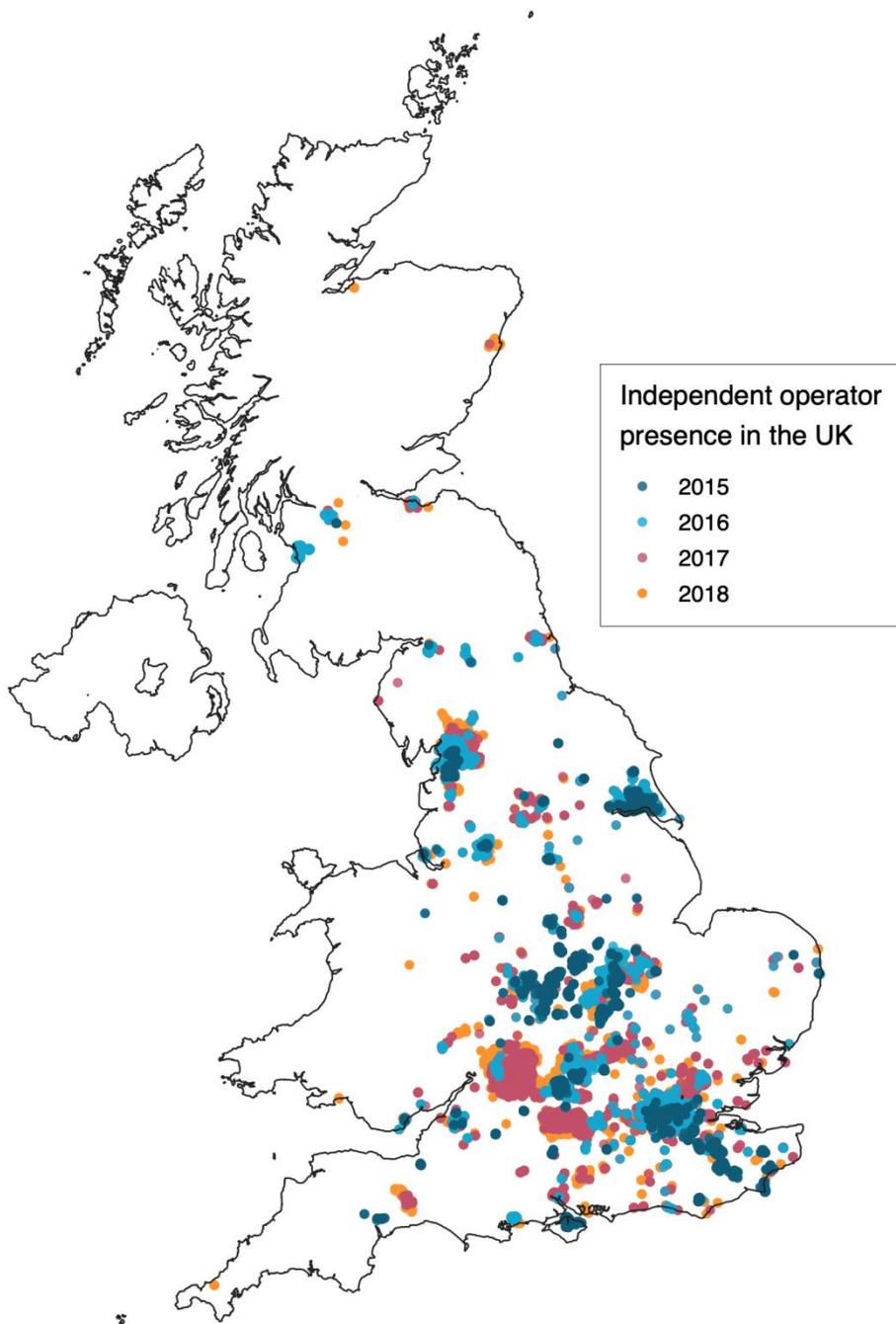


Figure 3: Fixed superfast & ultrafast independent operator presence in UK, end-December 2018

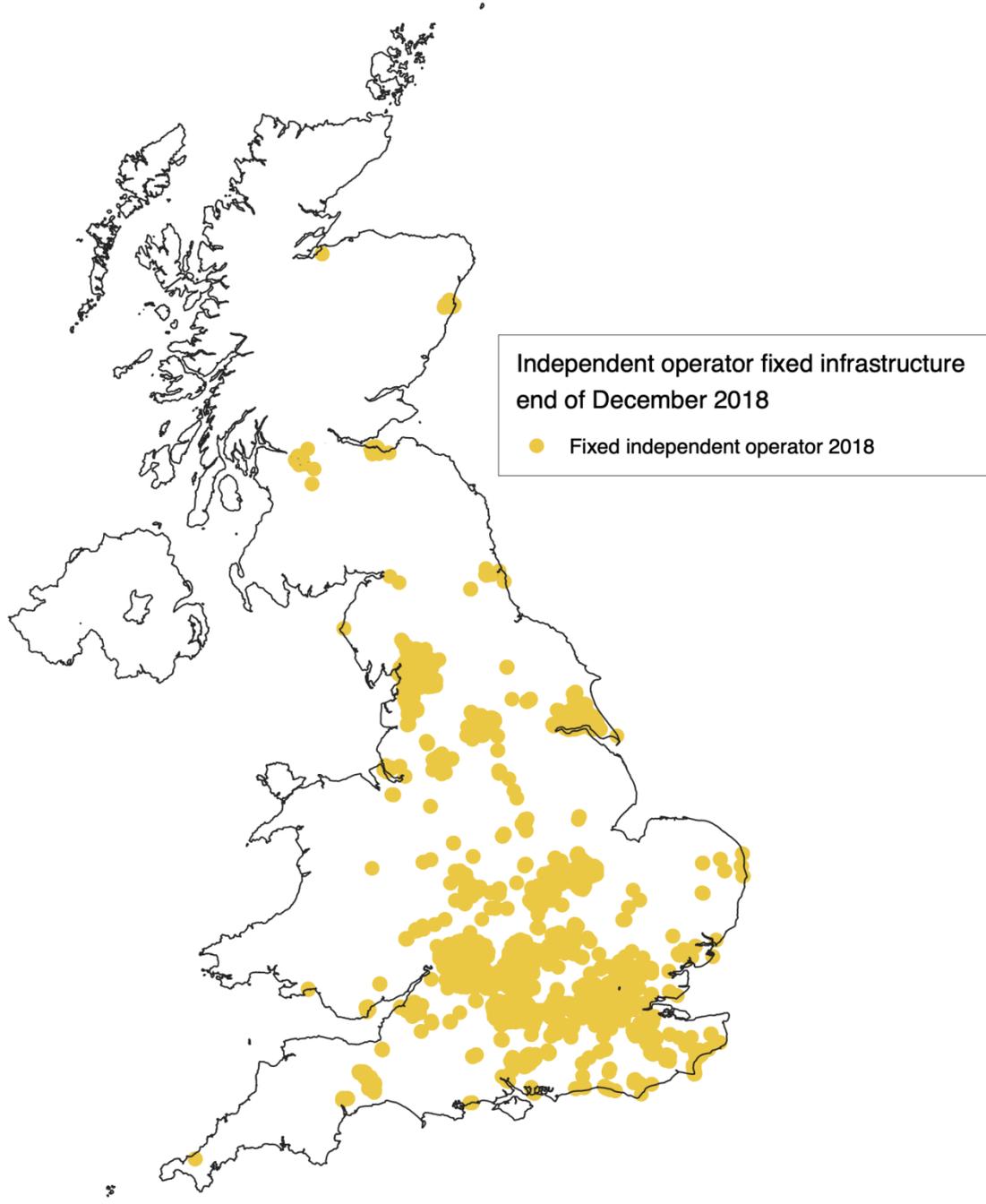


Figure 4: Independent operator FWA presence in UK, selected players, end-December 2018

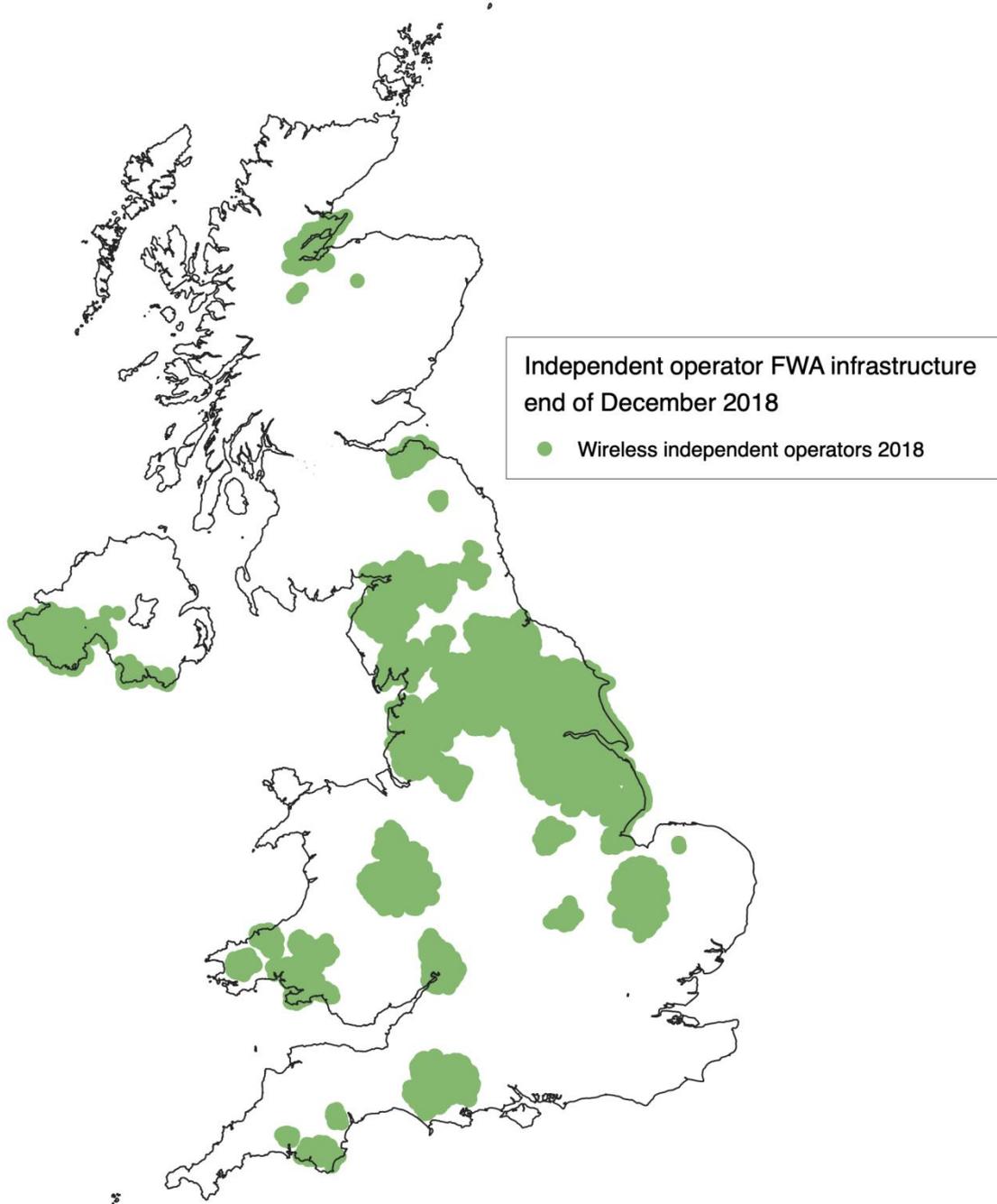
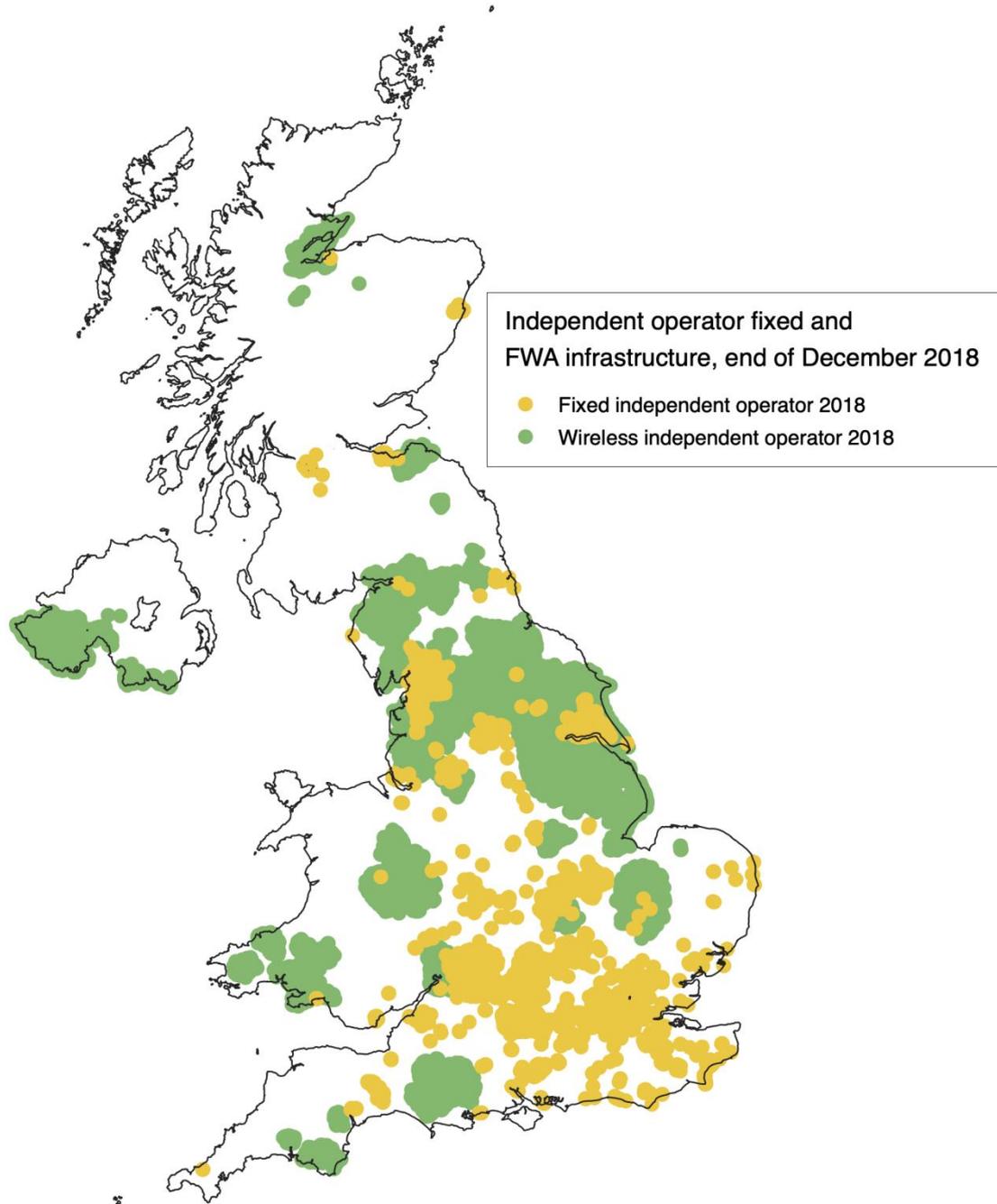
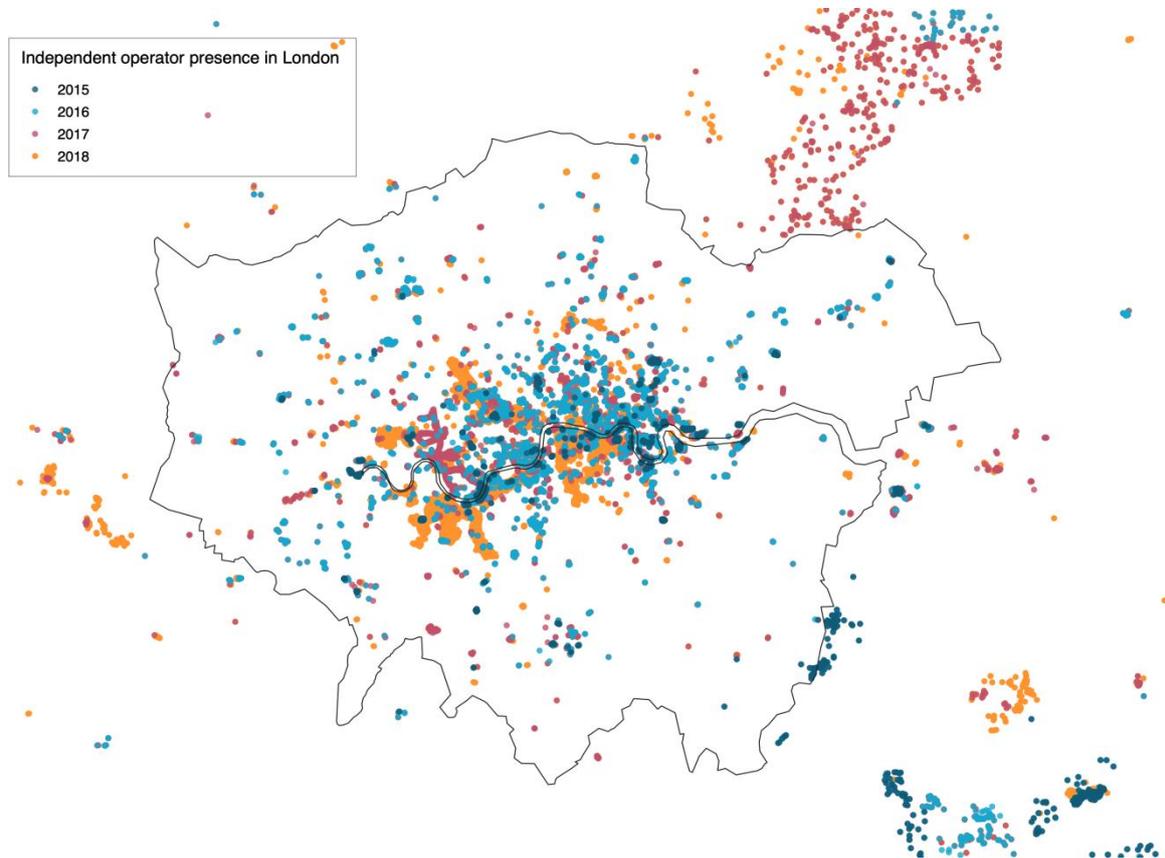


Figure 5: Independent operator presence fixed & selected FWA players in UK, end-December 2018



Looking more closely at London and surrounds, we can see in greater detail how independent fixed network operators have continued to expand their coverage over the past four years through both infill and spread.

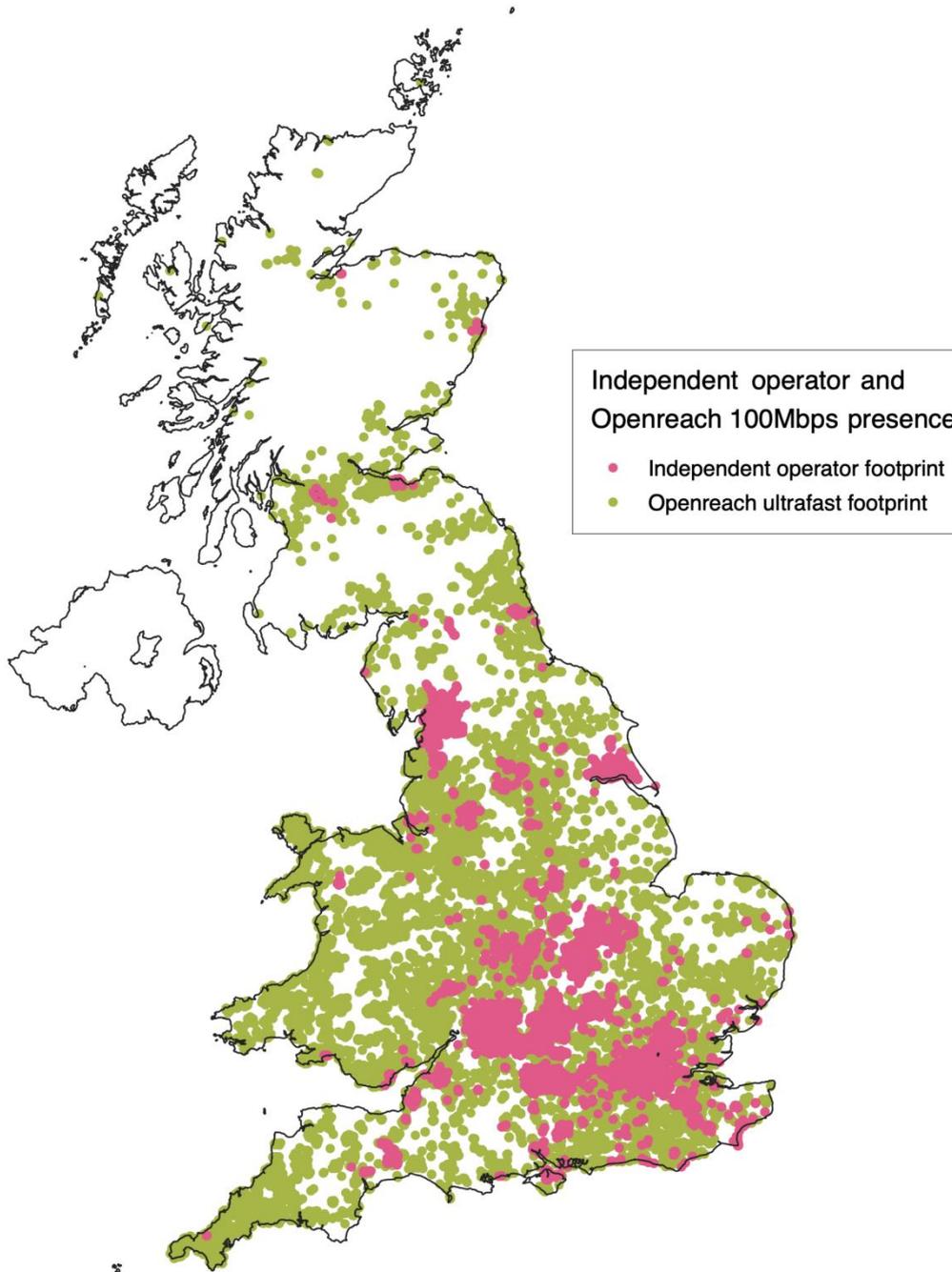
Figure 6: Fixed independent operator presence in London



London is also interesting to look at in terms of overbuild. The highest percentage of overbuild intersections showing overlapping ultrafast coverage belonging to independent network operators and Openreach are generally in London.

It is possible, although certainly not conclusive from the data, that Openreach is targeting areas that are covered by independent operators with its FTTP deployment. However, it is equally likely we are seeing a range of operators targeting areas that they believe are the best for return on investment. We will learn more as the deployments continue.

Figure 7: Independent operators and Openreach 100Mbps+ presence, Q1 2019



6. Independent network sector investment

The past year has continued to see investment in the UK's independent network sector with several announcements. These add up to over 3.36 billion worth of private funds into the sector over the long term. This compares with £2.5 billion worth of private finance promised for the sector as of April 2018 (when our last report was published). If we add in £1 billion in funding reportedly being sought by TalkTalk³, the total this year increases to £4.36 billion.

Many of the smaller operators, both fixed and FWA, taking part in our survey noted their capex plans for 2019 and 2020. These stand at £118 million for 2019 and £165 million for 2020. This is a significant rise on last year's figures of an expected £37.5 million for 2019. It is important to note this is only part of the sector and are figures provided to us by industry players as intended.

Table 3 provides a comparison summary of data collected in last year's INCA survey with this year's survey.

A summary of selected investments are detailed in Table 4 below. Earlier announcements can be found in our previous report for INCA, [Metrics for the UK altnet sector](#), published in April 2018.

Table 3: Investment into independent networks, expectations over two years

Form of finance	INCA survey 2018	INCA survey 2019
Private investment into sector	£2.5bn	£3.36bn £4.36bn including expected investment in FibreNation
Capex 2018/2019/2020	£37.5m 2019	£118m 2019/£165m 2020

³ ISPreview article published 28 April 2019 <https://www.ispreview.co.uk/index.php/2019/04/talktalk-try-to-raise-1bn-for-ftth-as-sse-mulls-sale-of-retail-isp.html>

Table 4: Independent network operator investment announcements

Operator	Investment announcement
Airband	07/08/18 received £16 million in funding from National Digital Infrastructure Fund
CityFibre	18/12/18 Put in place a debt package of £1.12 billion from seven major financial institutions, ABN AMRO, Deutsche Bank, Lloyds Bank plc, Natixis, NatWest, Santander and Société Générale. Proceeds from infrastructure debt package to be used to fund first part of CityFibre's £2.5 billion investment plan 23/10/18 £2.5 billion investment programme reinforcing CityFibre's commitment to connect five million homes to full fibre
Community Fibre	23/04/18 £25 million funding round completed for Community Fibre led by the National Digital Infrastructure Fund, with follow-on investment by long-term institutional investor, RPMI Railpen
County Broadband	12/06/18 received £46 million in funding from Aviva Investors' infrastructure equity platform to expand network across the East of England
G.Network	05/11/18 Closed deal with investment partner Albion Capital resulting in Cube Infrastructure Managers providing initial £60 million of additional funding; already had investment of £4.6 million from Albion
Hyperoptic	07/11/18 Strategic investment from Mubadala Investment Company 03/08/18 Completed a debt raise of £250 million from eight international banks
Nextgenaccess	26/10/18 Secured £22 million of investment from the National Digital Infrastructure Fund, which acquired substantial minority shareholding in Nextgenaccess and is providing capital facilities to support growth
TalkTalk Group	05/03/19 Encouraging investor interest in FibreNation initiative 21/11/18 Talks with potential partners to find appropriate long-term capital structure for FibreNation
toob	25/03/19 secured £75 million funding package from Amber Infrastructure Group's National Digital Infrastructure Fund

Source: Independent operators

7. Independent network sector concerns

The INCA survey asked operators to rate how concerned they are about issues in terms of challenge to their network deployment and ability to offer services to and acquire customers.

The top three concerns were found to be:

1. Planning and street works delays and/or costs
2. Delivery times from Openreach or other operators
3. Overbuild by Openreach or other operators.

Planning and street works have moved into the top spot for concerns this year compared with fourth place last year.

Delivery times and overbuild by Openreach and other operators have also moved up the agenda this year.

Using Passive Infrastructure Access from Openreach is regarded as more challenging this year, moving into fourth place as a concern.

Meanwhile access to cost-effective backhaul services and engaging with developers and/or local authorities on new build housing plans have moved down the list of key concerns.

Getting wayleaves remains stable as the fifth issue of concern.

In addition, there is a general concern in the industry about access to a pool of labour with suitable skills in any new post-Brexit immigration regime.

The survey suggests there is still work to be done by the Barrier Busting Task Force at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), other Government departments and local authorities on a number of these concerns – street works in particular, and also wayleaves.

Clearly these changes are relative and the results do not mean there is more or less concern about particular issues – they merely shed light on the order of priority.

We will repeat this question in future surveys to track progress on concerns and identify any new issues arising. Figure 8 lists the full range of responses. Figure 9 illustrates changes year-on-year.

Figure 8: Independent network operators' concerns

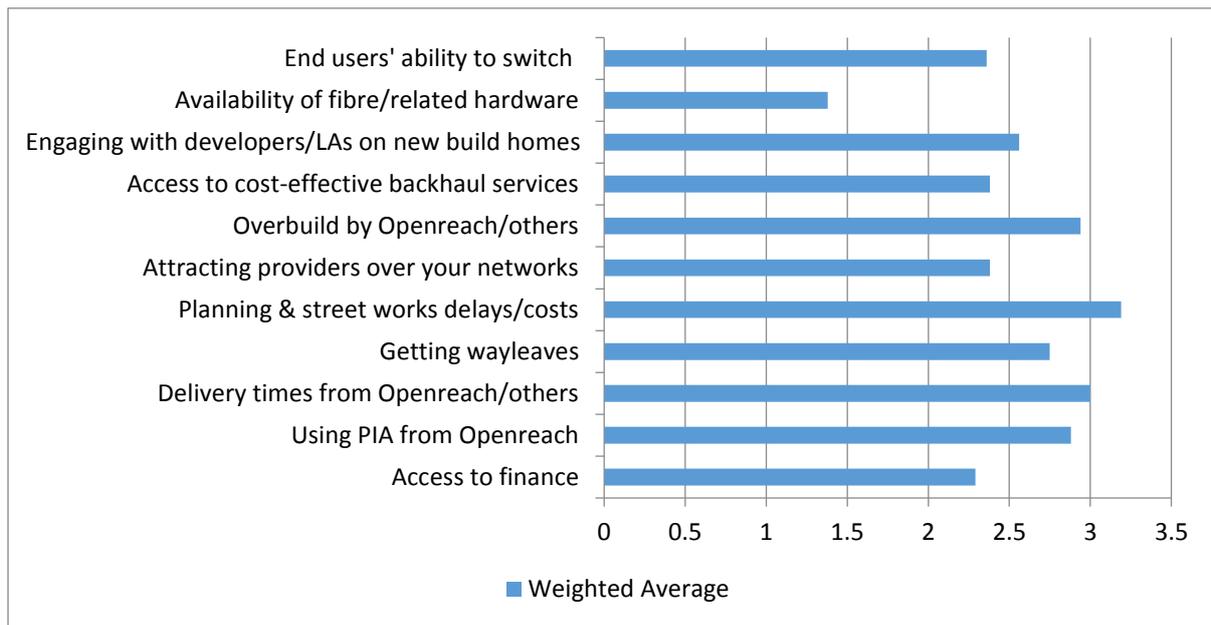
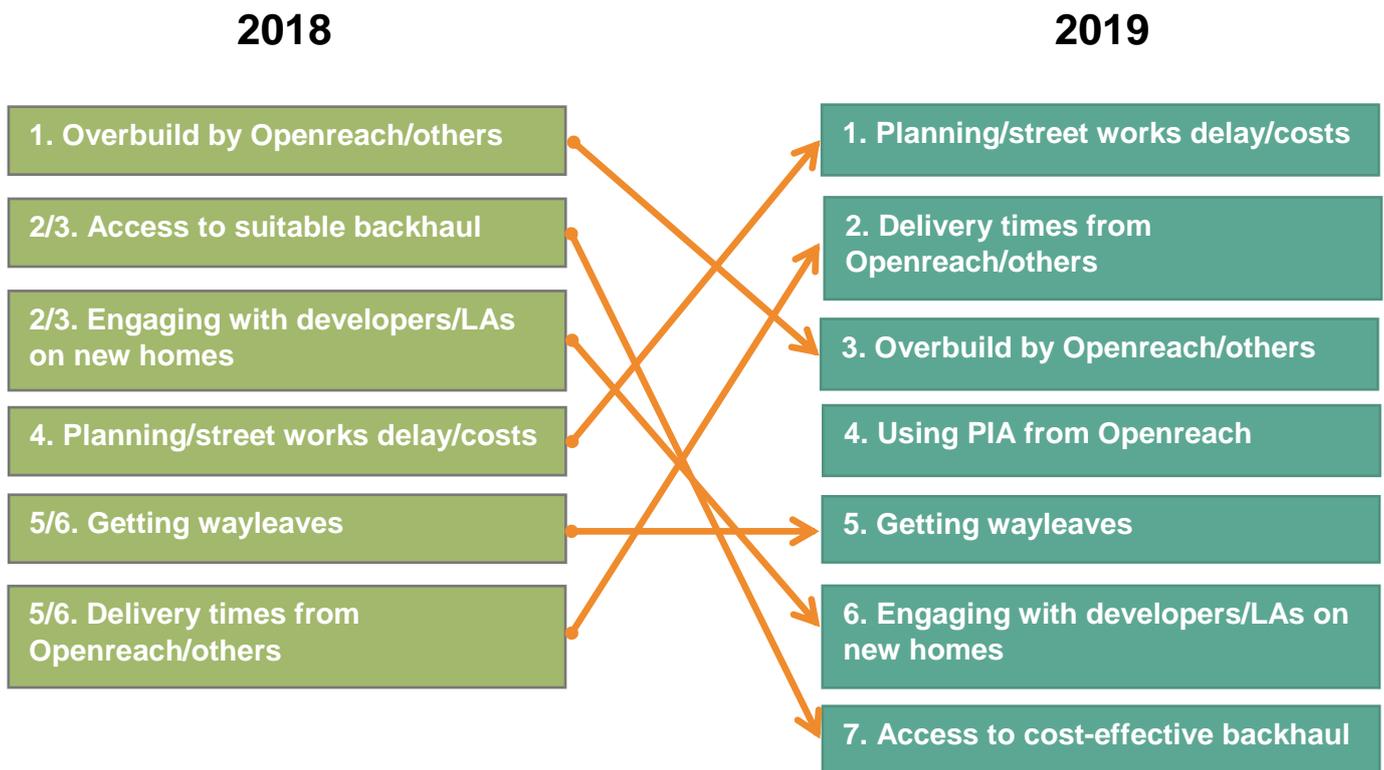


Figure 9: Changing concerns 2018 to 2019



8. Appendix A

INCA/Point Topic independent network survey 2019

Following our highly successful survey last year, [INCA](#) is continuing its partnership with [Point Topic](#) to gather better information about the independent network sector including coverage, plans and key concerns. The findings from 2018, which can be seen [here](#), resulted in significant coverage in the media and highlighted the increasing importance of the independent network sector to policy makers. We would be most grateful for your participation in our 2019 survey.

The information collected will be used on an aggregated basis to promote the sector to government, Ofcom, investors and the media, in order to ensure independent networks continue to be recognised and supported. The results are expected to be published in an INCA report in April 2019. We also welcome responses from non-INCA members and those belonging to other associations including [UKWISPA](#).

Point Topic will also draw on this information to produce its regular six-monthly Ultrafast & Superfast Broadband Update report including its own estimates for premises passed and connected, as well as coverage mapping, which is now carried out in conjunction with [thinkbroadband](#).

The survey should take around 10 minutes to complete. We would appreciate your response by 30 April. It would be really helpful if you are able to answer as many of the questions below as possible. However, if you prefer we can contact you by phone instead to cover some or all of the questions – please contact Annelise Berendt at Point Topic Direct tel: +44 (0)1279 726 567, annelise.berendt@point-topic.com

If you are not the person in your organisation that can answer the survey, please forward this url to someone who can. Many thanks for your help.

1. Your Details

Name

Company

Email Address

2. What type of networks do you build? (tick all that apply)

	Fibre to the Premises (FTTP, FTTH) active or passive
	Fibre to the Building (FTTB)
	Ethernet
	Fibre to the Cabinet (FTTC) LLU
	FTTC - Fibre to the Node/SLU
	FTTC - G.Fast
	Hybrid Fibre Coax (HFC / DOCSIS 3.x)
	Fixed Wireless Access using unlicensed or lightly licenced spectrum
	Fixed Wireless Access using licenced spectrum
	FWA - Point to Point
	FWA - Point to Multipoint
	Satellite Broadband
	Other (please specify)

3. Is your network accredited to any of the following schemes? (tick all that apply)

INCA Gold Standard

UKWISPA Quality Accreditation

Other (please specify)

4. Coverage

How many premises do your fixed networks pass – split by residential and business?

Note: Ofcom's [definition](#) of "full fibre coverage" is "where the network has been rolled out to a 'lead-in' that will serve the consumer end premises and where the consumer would expect to pay a standard installation charge for that connection".

	Residential	Business	Total
End-December 2018			
Do you anticipate by the end of 2020			
Your longer term aspiration by the end of 2025			

Please provide your definition of "pass" if this varies and/or you use a different network technology.

5. How many premises are within coverage range of your wireless networks – split by residential and business?

	Residential	Business	Total
End-December 2018			
Do you anticipate by the end of 2020			
Your longer term aspiration by the end of 2025			

Please provide your definition of "within coverage range".

6. How many end-users are connected to your fixed networks – split by residential and business?
split by wholesale and retail?

	Residential	Business	Wholesale	Retail	Total
End-December 2018					
Do you aim to connect by the end of 2020					
Your longer term aspiration by the end of 2025					

7. How many end-users are connected to your wireless networks – split by residential and business?
split by wholesale and retail?

	Residential	Business	Wholesale	Retail	Total
End-December 2018					
Do you aim to connect by the end of 2020					
Your longer term aspiration by the end of 2025					

8. What is your overall capital expenditure?

Current financial year

Next financial year

9. How much do you spend on operating and maintaining the network/s?

Current financial year

Next financial year

10. How would you rate the following issues in terms of their challenge to your network deployment and ability to offer services to and acquire customers?

Please rate issues on a scale from 1 - 'Not an issue' to 5 - 'Very significant challenge'

	Access to finance
	Using Passive Infrastructure Access from Openreach
	Delivery times for services from Openreach or other operators (e.g. EAD circuits)
	Getting wayleaves
	Planning and street works delays and/or costs
	Attracting service providers to deliver services over your networks
	Overbuild by Openreach or other operators
	Access to cost-effective backhaul services
	Engaging with developers and/or local authorities on new build housing plans
	Availability of fibre and/or fibre related hardware

Ability for end users to easily switch between Openreach and other operators
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11. Please note any specific comments that you may have on the above

12. Are there any other issues you would like to raise?
(please specify)

13. Point Topic collects postcodes and/or premises data in order to map the coverage of broadband networks. It works with thinkbroadband to do this and therefore shares this data with its partner accordingly. We would be most grateful if you would email an Excel sheet listing your coverage data, ideally noting maximum speeds available to end users in each location if this varies – email to annelise.berendt@point-topic.com or tick the option below to be contacted by us:

Please contact me on

DONE - THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP