

## **Minimising disruption while modernising digital infrastructure**

The telecoms infrastructure in the UK is going through a massive programme of investment to upgrade the old copper wires connecting our homes and businesses to full fibre optic cables. Alongside BT and Virgin Media, the alternative network providers, colloquially known as Altnets, are making a huge contribution to this digital transformation. Altnet investment is providing the future-proofed digital infrastructure needed for a successful 21<sup>st</sup> century economy and society.

Altnet presence in an area not only offers a new higher quality broadband option for consumers but also [drives down the price of broadband](#) from incumbent players. INCA is the trade association that brings together many of the Altnets. When building their full fibre networks, INCA encourages its members to share infrastructure to reduce the amount of disruption caused to local residents and communities.

The telecoms regulator Ofcom has mandated that BT should provide access to its existing underground ducts and telegraph poles to competitors building new fibre networks. Almost all Altnets use BT's Physical Infrastructure Access (PIA) product whenever possible. The head of BT's Openreach division, responsible for the physical infrastructure, recently estimated that nearly 50% of the existing 4 million telegraph poles are now being shared with Altnets.

However, if there is no suitable existing infrastructure in a location, telecoms operators have no choice but to either install new poles from which the new fibre-optic cables can be attached to surrounding properties or dig up streets, driveways and gardens to install fibre underground. The alternative is that these areas will be left behind, to languish in the digital slow lane with all that means for future prosperity.

### **Infrastructure Sharing Group**

A recent survey conducted by Censuswide on behalf of the Internet Service Providers Association found that nearly 70% of respondents would accept new telegraph poles if it meant better broadband. However, some members of local communities have understandably raised concerns about new poles appearing in their areas.

Earlier this year, INCA set up a new working group to encourage Altnets to share their infrastructure where possible. We are also encouraging other utilities and public sector

organisations to share their infrastructure and thus to reduce the amount of street works and street furniture required to support the UK's new full fibre networks. More information on the work of the INCA Infrastructure Sharing Group can be found on our website [here](#).

Industry acknowledges that there are some concerns with regards to pole deployment, albeit limited. Following a roundtable discussion with Julia Lopez MP, the Minister for Digital Infrastructure, and industry representatives on 18 Apr, INCA and sector colleagues will be working collaboratively to undertake a review of the pole siting code of practice with the aim of improving industry best practice.

The telecoms industry is on a big journey to replace the aging copper telephone network with the networks of the future. This investment programme totals nearly £50bn and is supported by Government and the industry regulator Ofcom. All of us will benefit from this investment, but it is vital that the industry and Government, both national and local, engage with local communities to ensure that people are informed about the changes taking place and have an opportunity to voice any concerns they have. At INCA we will do our best to play a helpful and positive role in this endeavour.

If you have any questions about the installation of new infrastructure in your community, contact the network operator. If you have concerns about the nature or safety of street works in your area then use the contact details that should be displayed at the work site. If none are displayed, then contact your local authority's highways team who should have a record of who they have granted permission for the works.

You can also use a service such as [bidb.uk](#) to find out about street works in your local area.

#### **FAQs:**

1. What is Physical Infrastructure Access (PIA)?

*PIA allows for the access and sharing of Openreach's existing duct and pole infrastructure. This has facilitated competition by cutting the upfront cost of building competing networks and has allowed for greater deployment without the need for new poles to be erected.*

2. Why does the Hull area not have PIA like the rest of the country?

*KCOM, rather than Openreach, has significant market power in the Hull area, therefore the same PIA remedies available in the rest of the country are not available on the same terms in the Hull area.*

*Ofcom recognises that other operators may seek space on KCOM's network of underground infrastructure and/or poles to deploy their own networks in the Hull area, however, other operators do not receive the same level of access, flexibility and affordability as seen with the regulated PIA from Openreach. This has meant that other operators have had to build new infrastructure in the Hull area.*

3. Is there creosote on the pole in my street? Is it safe?

*HSE have confirmed that under the Great Britain Biocidal Products Regulation (GB BPR), biocides such as creosote undergo rigorous evaluations for safety to human health, animal health and the environment and for efficacy before they can be supplied and used to ensure they meet strict regulatory criteria. Creosote is approved as a biocidal active substance under GB BPR for use as a wood preservative. It is only approved for use by professionals for restricted uses, which include the preservation of telegraph poles.*

4. Why is the copper network being replaced?

*BT, and other operators, will be retiring their use of their old copper networks. Analogue networks have been in operation for decades and have reached the end of their serviceable life. BT and Altnets are rolling out the fibre networks of the future.*

5. I have concerns about [Company Name] installing new poles on my street? Are they a member of INCA?

*A list of INCA members can be found [here](#). Concerns about the installation should be discussed directly with the operator.*

6. Company X are putting their new infrastructure underground in a nearby location, why are Company Y installing new poles here rather than going underground?

*Almost all Altnets use the regulated PIA product wherever possible, but in some locations, it's simply not possible - sometimes the existing infrastructure is not available, is damaged, or existing regulations make it impossible to use, so alternative means need to be pursued to connect residents.*