INCA Standards Group Position Statement on Standards for Ofcom Consumer Standards WG RC v2.0

INCA Standards Group

1. The objective, as set by the UK government (DCMS) and further developed in the June 2021 report of the multi-sector Gigabit Take-up Advisory Group (GigaTAG) is to promote gigabit-capable connections. INCA supports this objective. The scheme should use this name. Anything else is confusing. "Is my connection gigabit-capable or not?" has a binary yes/no answer.

2. INCA Standards Group notes the 31 Jan 2022 letter from the BEIS Business Secretary to Ofwat, Ofgem and Ofcom stating that "In relation to costs and service provision, we expect regulators to ensure the provision of transparent information for consumers to boost engagement, shape understanding and enable informed choices." INCA agrees.

3. The different types of connection: fibre, copper, co-ax, wireless are objective fact. These should be protected to be used correctly and only used correctly.

4. Ofcom's own Connected Nations report 2021[1] uses the following terms:
   • Full-fibre / full fibre
   • 5G
   • Gigabit-capable
   • Gigabit speeds
   • Upgraded cable (those that are gigabit-capable)
   • DOCSIS
   • Superfast

   Any departure from this will increase confusion and work against the objective of consumer clarity.

5. The same report defines the different technologies:
   • Copper (ADSL)
   • Fibre to the cabinet (FTTC)
   • Hybrid fibre coaxial cable (HFC)
   • Full fibre or "fibre to the premises" (FTTP)
   • Fixed Wireless Access (FWA)
   • Fixed Wireless Access via Wireless ISPs (WISPs)

   Ofcom's definitions agree with objective fact and international usage. Departure from this is a further source of confusion conflicting with the objective of enabling consumer choice through clear information.

   Ofcom also compares the different benefits of each technology. INCA Standards Group agrees this approach is of benefit to the consumer in informing their choice.

6. In December 2020, commenting on the 2020 report, Ofcom's media release[2] explained there are clear characteristics for different technologies: "Gigabit speeds can be delivered in two main ways currently: using the latest enhancement to the cable network developed originally for transmitting cable TV (known as DOCSIS 3.1); and full fibre, which uses fibre-optic connections all the way to your home – replacing the decades-old copper wires that were installed for the telephone network originally and are more likely to be affected during peak times and severe weather."

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[1] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/multi-sector-research/infrastructure-research/connected-nations-2021
[2] Gigabit broadband reaches one in four homes - Ofcom https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/media/media-releases/2020/gigabit-broadband-reaches-one-in-four-homes

INCA Standards Group agrees with Ofcom's stance that different technologies have different characteristics and further thinks that this would be benefit to the consumer when made clear.

7. In November 2021, INCA's Board supported a complaint made by a Member to the ASA and wrote to the ASA:

    INCA, the trade association for the independent operators of new digital infrastructure (the altnets), supports Swish Fibre's complaint to the ASA about the use of the term fibre in broadband advertising, agree that the current ASA guidance needs to be reviewed because of market changes over the past four years, and ask the ASA:

    - To limit the use of the term 'fibre" to full fibre broadband products only and prevent the term being used to describe generic broadband products; and
    - To require part-fibre products, like Openreach's Fibre to the Cabinet products, to be described as hybrid fibre or "part-fibre".

8. There is a strong view amongst INCA Members that the regulatory stance and advertising rules in countries such as Ireland, Italy and France both work together and benefit consumer choice by enabling clear and unambiguous marketing messages.

9. All scale retailers / operators (BT, Openreach, TalkTalk, Virgin and others) are growing to realise they will need to have a reason for consumers to upgrade from whatever (e.g. FTTC, HFC DOCSIS etc.) to FTTP. The easiest way to do this is to identify FTTP as a connection type.

10. Openreach's All-IP Migration programme is underway and about to go into top gear to achieve full migration to All-IP based on every exchange being at least 75% FTTP by 2025. They already recognise (and have stated) the benefits of being able to differentiate between FTTP and FTTC to aid this necessary migration.

11. Virgin Media have announced their investment in FTTP to replace the DOCSIS network. Customer migration from legacy to FTTP will be supported by being able to differentiate between the different connection technologies.

12. If I have a 100Mbps FTTP connection, is that gigabit-capable or not? Obviously, yes. Where would this come on any Tiered system?

13. Names of speeds. If used, should be consistent with those already used by Ofcom and BDUK in reports and communications with the consumer. Connected Nations is the starting point. The 2018 list here Speed Names | INCA summarises. Consistency is an aid to consumer comprehension. Inventing new names is a source of confusion and hence potential harm to consumer choice.

14. Ofcom already defines which technologies can provide which type of broadband along with typical use cases as per the table in Connected Nations 2021.

Type	Speed	Use cases	Fixed broadband technologies that can provide this service
Decent	10 Mbit/s down / 1 Mbit/s up	Video e.g. Zoom 1 hour HD TV (1GB in 15 min)	Copper (ADSL) FTTC (VDSL) HFC Cable Full Fibre

Superfast	At least 30 Mbit/s down	1 4K/UHD stream 1 hour HD TV in under 4.5 min	FTTC (VDSL) HFC Cable Full Fibre
Gigabit	1 Gbit/s and above down	4K film (100GB) in under 15 min greater reliability future proofed	HFC Cable (DOCSIS3.1 and above) Full Fibre

INCA Standards Group sees no benefit (and the potential of harm to consumer comprehension) to either changing this or trying to create a competing set of tiers.

Further, we note that Ofcom defines technologies as to what they "can" deliver rather than the actual service chosen by the consumer: hence a Full Fibre connection over which the consumer chooses a 100 Mbit/s service is considered "Gigabit". INCA agrees this approach.

15. Cross referencing the Ofcom definitions on pp 8-9 and the Fig 1 table on p10 clearly summarises that Ofcom sees a need to differentiate both on technology / characteristic AND type (speed bracket).

INCA Standards Group agrees this and considers that any other approach is contradictory. INCA's suggested approach does just this.

16. If the scheme is subjective, or technically detailed: jitter, reliability, quality etc, who evaluates / accredits / measures / polices?

17. There are internationally accepted industry standards such as FTTH Council. If the UK scheme disagrees or takes a different route, who controls / decides / monitors / regulates? Is an equivalent to the Energy Saving Trust proposed?

Conclusion:

INCA Standards Group's considered view is that

1. Protecting the correct use of the names and abbreviations of the different technologies used for connections is a necessary step to reducing consumer confusion. The correct identification of the different technologies in Connected Nations is welcomed and supported.

2. To take a different approach to Ofcom's Connected Nations report would be perverse, add to confusion and risk credibility damage through 2 contradictory messages from the same organization.

3. A technology-definition code is expandable as new technology develops simply by including new definitions as new technology is introduced.

4. Simple "gigabit-capable" marking can be expanded in future. Foe example, if the policy requirement becomes 10GBps, then a new 10-gigabit-capable mark can be introduced.

5. Simple schemes are more easily understood by, and communicated to, the consumer.

6. Ofcom has said that ASA has had informal discussions with them in which ASA indicated it would consider changing its Code do support the Ofcom Code when decided. Should the Ofcom Code include both a gigabit-capable mark and clear protection for technology descriptors, INCA would support this as detailed below.

7. A Tier system will not meet the objectives of supporting the government policy for "gigabit-capable" connections and the regulatory ask of supporting consumer choice through simple, clear and unconfusing information on services on offer.

8. A Tier system risks needing constant monitoring and revision when future regulatory objectives are set. It's too much of a straitjacket.

INCA considers that a stable and clear set of technology distinctions allied to a simple yes/no for gigabit-capability will enable the marketing departments of the Communications providers to craft their own brand messages in support of their services and communicate them effectively to consumers. When this underpins all CP messaging creative approach, the communication with the consumer will be enhanced thus enabling them to make more informed choices.

Once a Code to define the technologies is in place, alongside a gigabit-capable mark, marketing departments will use this to inform their messaging. It should be for the ASA to evaluate whether or not these messages comply with their advertising code.

In INCA's view any Tier system is likely to add to consumer confusion rather than reduce it. This is against government and regulatory policy and will reduce the ability of consumers to choose the connection that is right for them.

As with EST, Tier systems need continual review and upgrade to keep pace with future technology developments. This is a source of consumer confusion.

The marketing of "part fibre" services as indistinguishable from "full fibre" is the root cause of consumer confusion and should be addressed by clarity and distinction between the different technologies. Since those technologies have different characteristics, the marketing function in each organisation will be completely across using these characteristics to market their connections positively.

Ofcom should work with the ASA on the use of the word 'fibre' in broadband advertising. Allowing part-fibre products to be described as 'fibre' is misleading for consumers, and muddies the benefits of full fibre connections. The UK should implement similar advertising rules to those in Ireland, Italy and France, which require part-fibre connections to be described as part-fibre connections and which limit the use of the word fibre without qualification to full fibre services only.

Since part-fibre and full fibre technologies have different characteristics, the marketing function in each organisation will be completely different in using these characteristics to market their connections positively.

If a connection is part-fibre and part-copper, the consumer confusion arises when it is marketed as the same as all-fibre. This is misleading and inaccurate.

Using the concept of Tiers could lead to a complicated scheme such as the Energy Efficiency Rating scheme run by Home - Energy Saving Trust. This changed in 2021 from a range of A+++ to F to a "simpler" scheme of A – G with appliances previously in A+++ being put down to C or D because the scheme lacked headroom. The same will happen to any Tier system as new technologies are introduced over time. Scarcely an aid to consumer comprehension. A further downside is that it will require a separate and independent body equivalent to the EST to be set up and funded to monitor and police the scheme – or Ofcom will have to do it.

It also risks that a service delivered over, say, FTTP but offering the customer 100Mbps would not be in the "gigabit-capable" Tier. This is not correctly identifying gigabit-capable connections.

INCA Standards Group will not sign-up to any code which a) introduces further confusing through the use of subjective Tiers and b) does not support objective, clear and unambiguous distinction between the technologies:

- FTTP
- FTTC (e.g. Gfast)
- HFC (e.g. DOCSIS)
- FWA

Any scheme which does not include this does nothing to reduce consumer confusion. Rather, it risks further confusion and hence potential consumer harm.

INCA suggests that the twin objectives of:

1. Clearly identifying connections which are gigabit-capable (even if the subscriber chooses not to have services at that speed) and

2. Increasing consumer choice through clear and unambiguous communication of which technologies are in use

could be met by a simple system comprising two identifiers. The concept has already been proven to be successful for industry and consumer in the UK TV market. It is drawn from and supports Ofcom's own Connected Nations report.

1. A logo indicating whether or not this connection is capable of delivering a gigabit connection: a "Gigabit Tick". This is analogous to the highly successful (and well-recognised by the consumer) "Digital Tick" scheme setup when the TV system changed from analogue to digital. The Digital Tick logo was copyright and could only be used by devices which met a specific set of standards (DVB), additional HD requirements set by UK government to support government policy and included some training and staff knowledge requirements.

   It was very successful, free to use, recognised by consumers and helped communicate a potentially very technically confusing maze to choose the right digital TV equipment. It was also cheap for the industry to run.

2. Correct use of the technology identifiers such as FTTP / Full Fibre, FTTC / Part Fibre, HFC / DOCSIS or co-ax and so on. This may be a specific logo designed to go with the "Gigabit Tick" or simply ensuring the terms used are correct for the connection type. The ASA should be encouraged to amend their code in support of this use.

This would not require a great deal of policing or expensive and complex accreditation schemes. The type of connection is a matter of objective fact and whether or not it is "gigabit-capable" is also a matter of objective fact.

Information:

INCA is the trade association for the independent operators of new digital infrastructure, bringing together more than 200 member organisations, operators, telecoms suppliers, local authorities and professional services firms. All are working to renew the UK's digital infrastructure.

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INCA promotes a set of **Gold Standard Quality Marks** for Full Fibre, Hybrid Fibre, Fixed Wireless and Wholesale networks. The standards were defined by a working group of members (now the INCA Standards Group) and approved by INCA's board.

The **INCA Standards Group** meets regularly, created the INCA Gold Standard Scheme, reviews the Ofcom WG process and documentation, and includes members from:

- ACOME UK Ltd
- Axione UK
- Bailey Products
- Blue Wireless Technology Lts
- Calix Inc
- Cambium Networks
- Community Fibre Ltd
- Comtec Ltd
- Conservative Science & Technology Forum
- Corning
- Cybermoor
- Dolomite Solutions
- DZS
- Fern Trading
- Fibre Options
- Freedom Fibre Ltd
- Full Fibre Ltd
- G.Network
- Giganet Ltd
- Glide
- Grayshott Gigabit
- GreySky
- HellermanTyton Data Ltd
- Icotera
- Indigo Telecom Group
- Infractive Ltd
- ITS Technology Group Ltd
- J Bayliss Consulting Ltd
- John Henry Group Ltd
- Ogi
- Open Fibre Networks Ltd
- PacketFront Software
- Precision Optical Transceivers Inc
- STL
- Swish Fibre
- Telenco
- The AssetHUB Ltd
- Toob Ltd
- Truespeed
- TXO Systems Ltd
- Voneus Ltd
- Webro Cables and Connectors
- WightFibre

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- Wireless Coverage Ltd

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