

# Home-based Working

April 2025

## Introduction

1. The Independent Networks Cooperative Association (INCA) is the leading UK trade association representing organisations deploying independent digital infrastructure. Founded in 2010, INCA aims to foster a new approach to digital infrastructure, focusing on full fibre (FTTP) and high-quality wireless broadband whilst campaigning for the policy and regulatory support needed to maintain a healthy, competitive market that continues to attract investment to the UK. INCA has over 200 members and represents most of the full fibre infrastructure builders all over the UK, commonly referred to as Altnets. Members include network owners, operators, suppliers, and managers as well as access networks, middle mile networks, network hubs and exchanges and organisations (including public sector) that are developing or promoting independent networks.
2. INCA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the House of Lords Select Committee inquiry on home-based working. COVID-19 accelerated a move to “digital by default” services across society as well as triggering a move to flexible/hybrid working practices across the country. This submission will illustrate the vital role that connectivity performs in allowing for home-based working whilst also highlighting issues which must be overcome to improve remote-working practices and provide surety to employers that employees can undertake relevant duties whilst not physically present in the workplace.
3. Poor or absent connectivity, wherever an individual resides, determines whether working from home is feasible. The lack of connectivity could have a harmful effect on certain demographics ability to seek and retain employment. Certain disabilities may preclude an individual from being able to work on site with regularity, and working from home should be a viable alternative.
4. At the time of writing, this submission is the only published written evidence received by the House of Lords Select Committee on Home-based Working which focuses on the importance of connectivity in remote working; we urge the committee to consider it fully. INCA’s Chief Executive Officer, Paddy Paddison, would welcome the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee at an inquiry session.

## Challenges of Remote/Hybrid Working

5. According to thinkbroadband<sup>1</sup>, as of 23 Apr, full-fibre coverage in the UK stands at 76.92%. Full-fibre is the most reliable broadband connectivity technology; it is faster, less susceptible to damage and degradation and has a more stable connection. Yet tens of thousands of properties still cannot access even a “decent” broadband service (defined as at least 10 Mbps download and 1 Mbps upload). If a home is stuck on an old copper connection delivering only around 10 Mbps down, even routine tasks like video calls or accessing cloud applications can be challenging. The quality of a household’s internet link is therefore a decisive factor in whether someone can effectively work from home.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://labs.thinkbroadband.com/local/uk>

6. Where an individual lives has a direct impact on connectivity. According to Ofcom, rural areas have average broadband speeds which are 26% slower than those in urban areas.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, significant private investment alongside the government's Building Digital UK (BDUK) programme has extended networks into more regions – including hard-to-reach rural areas. Whilst coverage is approaching 80% for full-fibre networks, there remains work to do to complete the job to allow for equality of service, and in parallel, there needs to be a concerted effort to move from coverage to connections; many communities and businesses still do not have access to or understand the opportunities presented by access to gigabit-speed internet.
7. Poor connectivity is not solely a rural problem. Connectivity not-spots continue to be problematic in urban centres across the country. In Greater London alone, over 600,000 premises are designated as 'white', referring to premises which have no gigabit network infrastructure and where none is likely to be developed within three years. In fact, London and the South-East, the two regions having the highest median household wealth and boasting the highest GDP per capita sit at the forefront of urban digital inequality.
8. An individual who may live in a high-rise building or a multi-dwelling unit (MDU) may find that there is gigabit-speed infrastructure in the area, but not accessible within the building. This is a complex property-rights issue to overcome. The resultant lack of full-fibre in these buildings means that an individual may not be able to work from home, but colleagues living in a different type of property are able to do so. INCA urges a full-and-proper consultation from government seeking input on how to overcome urban not spots without dismantling vital competition in the sector. The aforementioned BDUK programme does also provide funding to connect urban not-spots – and rightly so – but the concerns with regards to connectivity in MDUs is a separate concern which requires government leadership to resolve.
9. All employees have the legal right to request flexible working, but poor connectivity threatens the practicality of it, inhibits employment for vulnerable people and entrenches social and digital exclusion.

## Digital Skills and Confidence

10. Access to infrastructure is only one side of the equation – digital skills and user confidence are equally critical for successful home-based working. As acknowledged within the government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan, there are a range of demographics who struggle digitally and may struggle to engage in working from home practices; these include older people, younger people, disabled people and low-income households.
11. When working on-site, or in the office et al., if an individual who is not particularly au fait with technology encounters a problem, they are likely to be able to call on a colleague for assistance to resolve the problem. This is not as practicable when working from home, whereby a colleague may be less inclined to contact a colleague to resolve a problem on account of being seen as a nuisance. Employees with low digital literacy can feel isolated or frustrated in a home-based setting, which undermines productivity and morale.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/phones-and-broadband/coverage-and-speeds/latest-home-broadband-performance-trends-revealed>

12. Fast, reliable connectivity delivered by full-fibre networks is essential for effective home-based working. High-definition video conferencing, collaborative whiteboard sessions and the transfer of large files place demands on bandwidth and latency that legacy copper lines cannot consistently meet, whereas gigabit-capable fibre provides the necessary stability and near-symmetrical speeds. At the same time, a dependable connection makes every-day online tasks - paying invoices, arranging deliveries or accessing electronic payslips - straightforward, thereby reducing frustration and building confidence among users who may be hesitant to engage digitally.
13. Many digitally excluded people are held back by fear of scams, low self-belief ("I'm too old for this"), or a sense that having digital skills serves no purpose for them. This digital exclusion is entrenched in certain demographics and ultimately impacts job opportunities and flexible working patterns if they do not have the requisite skills and confidence to work independently.
14. INCA members have observed these challenges first-hand, for example, older people who may still be in employment – are hesitant about securing connectivity in their homes, believing that broadband "wasn't for people like them." INCA members have had some success in overcoming these beliefs through targeted outreach, coffee mornings and tailored demonstrations to exhibit the possibilities of connectivity in the home. Capturing these qualitative shifts is crucial for understanding how to challenge digital disinterest, particularly in isolated or older populations who may still be in employment but who have never before had an opportunity to work remotely.
15. INCA is supportive of the principles of DSIT's Digital Inclusion Action Plan in overcoming entrenched digital exclusion across all demographics. INCA considers it beneficial for this inquiry to consider home-based working through the prism of the Action Plan to thoroughly consider the different demographics who would struggle with remote or flexible working as a result of not having the skills or confidence to engage digitally.

## Recommendations

16. Notwithstanding the wider debate about the merits of home-based working, there is a need to ensure that every person in the UK has equal access to the basic infrastructure requirements that enable home-based working, i.e. a reliable internet connection.
17. While lack of gigabit coverage is rightly considered a priority for rural areas, there are many urban areas, including in MDUs, that currently lack coverage. Government must act to ensure that these areas benefit from competitive broadband rollout.
18. The Government's focus on extending gigabit coverage needs to be complemented with an equal focus on driving take-up and adoption. A government-led national campaign to support the digital transformation is needed; if government messaging around this is non-existent or not appropriate, it will only exacerbate the digital divide.