Transport Select Committee:

Managing the impact of street works

Independent Networks Cooperative Association (INCA)

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Introduction

1. The Independent Networks Cooperative Association (INCA) is the leading UK trade association for organisations deploying independent digital infrastructure. Established in 2010, INCA has over 200 members, including network owners, operators, suppliers, and local authorities, who share a commitment to accelerating the rollout of full-fibre (FTTP) and high-quality wireless broadband. Our members – colloquially referred to as 'Altnets' - play a vital role in meeting the UK's gigabit broadband targets, which currently aim for 85% coverage by 2025 and near-universal coverage by 2030 (House of Commons Library, 2023).

2. A November 2024 House of Commons research briefing stresses the need for stronger cross-departmental coordination- particularly between the Department for Transport (DfT) and those overseeing digital infrastructure - to reduce barriers to gigabit deployment (House of Commons Library, 2024). For INCA members, there remains a clear expectation that policy alignment in areas such as street works is critical for efficient full-fibre broadband rollout.

3. This submission addresses each of the Transport Committee's core areas:

    i. The effect of utility works on road and pavement surface quality and on maintenance needs and costs, and how local authorities can manage this.

    ii. Whether local authorities have sufficient powers and resources to manage the effect of street works on congestion, travel disruption, pavement access, and accessibility.

    iii. The effectiveness of processes for notification of works and obtaining permits, including the classification of emergency works and opportunities for coordinated works, and what makes for a good working relationship between utility companies and highway authorities.

    iv. Whether fines are a sufficient deterrent to poor practice, whether other enforcement mechanisms would work better, and whether the inspections regime introduced in 2023 has improved the quality of reinstatement works.

    v. Whether lane rental is a successful model, the potential merits of making it available in more areas, and what other tools or best practices could be more widely adopted.

4. Throughout, INCA emphasises that cooperation between local authorities and telecoms operators can minimise disruption for road users and hasten the rollout of much-needed connectivity infrastructure

The effect of utility works on surface quality and maintenance

5. Highways serve multiple functions, providing routes for motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians, and acting as conduits for essential utilities such as gas, water, electricity, and telecommunications. Although unavoidable, frequent street works can frustrate residents and increase maintenance costs, especially when works are substandard or where repeated excavations occur in the same location.

6. Telecoms operators have strong incentives to restore surfaces properly. Prolonged or repeated works delay network activation, with no revenue generated until the infrastructure goes live. Costly remedial interventions and damage to local goodwill also provide a clear commercial motivation to minimise disruption. A significant increase in full-fibre broadband rollout activity in the next few years, tied to the government's 2030 coverage goals (House of Commons Library, 2023), makes it vital to address any consistent issues with reinstatement.

7. Local authorities can inspect works, require remedial action, and impose fees for non-compliance. Despite these safeguards, variability persists. Some areas interpret standards flexibly, while others enforce them robustly. This inconsistency can create confusion or lead to higher-maintenance surfaces.

8. INCA supports further consistency through enhanced training and greater sharing of good practice among local authorities and operators. Wider use of digital tools such as Street Manager (DfT, 2023), which can log photos and data about each excavation, could also reduce instances of poor reinstatement. Where clarity exists on shared expectations, surface quality tends to be higher, reducing the likelihood of expensive repairs and protecting the public from unnecessary disruption.

Local authority powers and resources

9. Local authorities in England have significant powers to regulate street works under the Traffic Management Act 2004, including the ability to issue permits, set conditions, and charge for overruns (UK Parliament, 2004). Despite these powers, local authorities sometimes struggle with capacity, particularly when telecoms rollouts intensify. The scale of planned broadband projects, aimed at meeting national coverage goals, can put strain on permitting teams if their budgets or staff numbers are insufficient (House of Commons Library, 2024).

10. Many authorities recover administrative costs through permit fees, but this revenue does not always cover actual staffing and oversight requirements, especially during high-volume deployment phases. An under-resourced local authority may process permits slowly, delay inspections, or struggle to coordinate with other utilities, leading to road closures that remain in place longer than necessary. This scenario increases public frustration and undermines confidence in the local authority's ability to balance utility needs with transport efficiency.

11. The November 2024 Commons briefing notes that facilitating street works demands improved central and local coordination (House of Commons Library, 2024). A clearer alignment between digital infrastructure plans and DfT policies can help ensure local authorities are neither overwhelmed nor hindered by conflicting objectives. Additional government guidance, funding, or training opportunities could help local authorities update their processes, adopt digital permit systems, and hire the expertise required to coordinate an expanding volume of telecoms projects.

12. Recent feedback from an INCA member survey points to recurring challenges. Many operators cite limited funding or staff resources at local authorities, inconsistent enforcement of street works regulations, and confusing application systems. Some also indicate a lack of alignment between the DfT's and DSIT's priorities. These issues echo the government's own recognition of the need for more integrated approaches if the UK is to achieve its digital connectivity ambitions without causing undue transport disruption. INCA encourages the Government to establish a cross-departmental working group led by the Cabinet Office to coordinate more integrated approaches in delivery and address concerns as they arise.

Effectiveness of notification processes and permit systems

13. Under the Traffic Management Act 2004, local authorities can implement permit schemes with set timescales for notices and different categories of work. In practice, though, permit processes can vary significantly from one area to another. Operators working across multiple authorities frequently encounter a range of administrative requirements, digital platforms, and fee structures, which can introduce delays, higher costs, and occasional frustration.

14. Regulations now ask utilities to submit start and stop notices for works during weekends and bank holidays (DfT, 2023c). While the principle is understandable, particularly if road or pedestrian traffic is still relevant, there may be staffing gaps at local authorities outside normal weekday hours. If no personnel are available to process notices, the requirement can become an administrative exercise with minimal practical effect. More flexible

staffing or reconsideration of these deadlines could help ensure that real oversight is maintained rather than simply fulfilling a box-ticking procedure.

15. In parallel, local authorities can require operators to coordinate projects wherever possible, an approach that can minimise repeated road openings. However, genuine coordination demands robust forward planning and shared systems. Where councils proactively host planning sessions or use collaborative mapping tools (Street Works UK), INCA believes outcomes can be better. We believe better aligned scheduling will help to reduce congestion and cut down on the total number of disruptions affecting road users.

16. Successful relationships between operators and authorities usually involve open communication, a degree of flexibility, and mutual understanding of how costly or time-consuming unexpected delays can be. INCA members believe that when trust is established, both sides can adapt schedules as soon as issues arise, rather than defaulting to blanket restrictions or fines that can stall critical works.

Whether fines are a sufficient deterrent, and the role of inspections

17. The current regime allows local authorities to fine operators that overrun their permit times or fail to submit required notices on time. Remedial costs also fall to operators when reinstatements are substandard (UK Parliament, 2004). Although higher fines may deter genuinely poor practice, there is a risk that blanket increases could penalise telecoms operators that are already under commercial pressure to complete works quickly and efficiently.

18. When surveying INCA members, the majority expressed concerns about being fined unfairly. Common reasons cited include overrun charges issued when sites are closed but equipment is left in a safe condition. Over the years, numerous local authorities have been observed to misuse the Fixed Penalty Notice (FPN) process, either as a means of financial gain or due to a lack of training and understanding in the correct application of these penalties.

19. An enhanced inspections regime introduced in 2023 enables more frequent checks on completed works (DfT, 2023a), with fees for failures that require repeated remedial visits. Consistent implementation, supported by well-trained local authority inspectors, can help reduce substandard reinstatements. Beyond fines, some operators suggest measures like performance bonds for those with poor compliance histories, publishing operator performance metrics, or promoting new materials that shorten excavation times and yield longer-lasting repairs. These alternatives may be more constructive than simply levying higher penalties.

Lane rental and other best practices

20. Surveyed INCA members were generally divided on the topic of if they would support further expansion of lane rental schemes. Lane rental schemes allow local authorities to charge daily rates for road occupation in high-traffic areas. Results in London and Kent show that lane rental can cut congestion and encourage faster completion (TfL, 2023; Kent County Council, 2023). Expanding the model to more regions could replicate these successes, though policymakers must guard against disproportionately penalising telecoms operators engaged in large-scale national full-fibre broadband projects. While the schemes aim to reduce road disruption, they present significant challenges for telecoms providers. The financial burden of lane rental fees - totalling £7M in London alone (Johnson, 2023) across utility companies in 2022-2023 - adds strain to already tight budgets, particularly for smaller operators.

21. Flexi-permits offer another avenue for more efficient street works, and something INCA endorses. By grouping a series of minor or standard works under a single permit over a set timeframe, operators can adapt their schedules without multiple permit applications. A high-profile trial in Sheffield demonstrated that flexi-permits can reduce administrative overhead, maintain oversight, and speed up essential works (One.Network, 2021). Wider adoption may require clearer guidance for local authorities and assurances that control and accountability remain intact.

22. A new trial, due to run from February to July 2025 (RMS, 2024), will test flexi-permits in a real-world setting under current legislative constraints. Participants will use the existing Street Manager system for the standard individual permits required by law, while also testing how a single flexi-permit could cover multiple works in the same locality. Although this parallel approach temporarily increases the administrative burden, it offers a practical way to gather evidence on the benefits and challenges of flexi-permits.

23. INCA supports these efforts, recognising that successful trials could inform future legislative or system changes, including potential updates to Street Manager itself. If flexi-permits become more widely adopted, operators would be able to manage area-wide deployments more efficiently, and local authorities would benefit from fewer repeated excavations and improved coordination—all of which align with the overarching aim of delivering gigabit broadband at pace and with minimal disruption.

24. Embracing digital permit systems is also seen as a major step forward, given how much complexity arises from paper-based or siloed procedures. Platforms such as Street Manager (DfT, 2023c) integrate all relevant information, permit applications, start/stop notices, inspection records—so that local authorities and operators can see the entire

picture in real time. More proactive planning, including collaborative mapping of planned works, is often cited as a way to avoid frequent excavations of the same stretch of road, especially when multiple utilities are active in one area.

25. Additionally, utilising existing physical infrastructure, such as Openreach's regulated Physical Infrastructure Access (PIA) product, offers a proven way to reduce fresh excavation requirements and reduce costs when deploying new full-fibre networks. By making use of available ducts and poles through PIA, which is the usual modus operandi for most Altnets, operators can often reduce the need for lane rentals and other schemes altogether. This approach minimises the impact on local communities, preserves valuable road capacity and helps to ensure that expanding full-fibre networks remains both cost-effective and efficient.

Conclusion

26. Street works underpin essential telecoms infrastructure, without which the UK cannot fulfil its vision for universal gigabit broadband coverage. Although some of these works inevitably disrupt the highway network, a carefully balanced approach ensures that roads remain well-maintained, inconvenience is minimised, and vital digital deployments proceed without unnecessary hold-ups.

27. Several principles emerge from INCA's discussions with members and broader sector evidence. The telecoms sector is commercially incentivised to finish work quickly and to a high standard, reducing the need for punitive or universal fine increases. INCA believes that local authority resourcing remains a key issue, with many councils lacking the capacity or consistent processes to handle large volumes of telecoms permits promptly. INCA also finds that government's own briefing suggests more joined-up policymaking, especially between transport and digital infrastructure departments, can better align regulatory decisions with our broadband targets. Finally, while fines have a role, alternative tools such as enhanced inspections, flexible permitting schemes, and transparent public reporting can often yield better outcomes.

28. A cohesive, cross-departmental framework, supported by well-resourced local authorities, would let Britain maintain a first-rate road network while meeting national connectivity ambitions. Operators, local government, and central departments can all benefit from sensible street works policies that balance short-term disruptions with the longer-term gains of a fully connected UK.

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