

Under the Microscope

March 2025

1. What area of science and technology do you think we should be looking at over the next Parliament?

The committee should scrutinise the government's policy for bridging the digital divide, considering both rural and urban regions and digital inclusion. With 1.6 million people in the UK currently living offline and around a quarter of the UK population with the lowest level of digital capability, these concerns require attention.

Poor connectivity is not unique to rural communities – there remain sizeable rural and populous urban areas which languish in the digital slow lane. The committee should consider what action the government is taking to tackle this problem.

Increasing coverage at pace of competing full-fibre broadband networks is a great success story, but coverage alone does not yield substantial benefits. The committee ought to consider what action the government needs to take to encourage full-fibre adoption in residential and business markets.

Digital inclusion is vital to boosting economic growth. A digitally informed population with fast, reliable broadband is well-placed to participate in the digital economy and the economic multiplier effect of digital inclusion can result in substantial long term economic benefits. INCA suggests the committee investigates why the Digital Inclusion Action Plan includes no new policy on increasing connectivity.

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2. Why does it matter to you?

As the body representing companies dedicated to bridging the digital divide, we want to ensure that the significant investments made in digital infrastructure are not wasted. A well-connected society is essential for business growth and a stronger, more resilient economy. The committee's insight, evidence and recommendations would ensure the best return on both taxpayers and private investment.

Despite the recent rapid deployment of full-fibre, many communities and businesses still do not have access to or understand the opportunities presented by access to gigabit-speed internet. This entrenches digital exclusion and economic disadvantage, and restricts availability of public services.

COVID-19 precipitated a move to "digital by default" services across society; access to the internet is not a luxury, it is a fundamental driver of economic growth, social inclusion, and access to public services. Underserved communities, both rural and urban, face a cycle of exclusion.

Furthermore, lack-of-access to gigabit-speed internet will limit technological prowess in the UK. If the government wants the UK to be a world-leader in transformational technology, e.g. AI, then it must consider how to encourage greater adoption of gigabit-speed connections enabled through network competition.

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3. What do you think the Government should do about it?

Digital inclusion is multi-faceted, encompassing affordability, skills, confidence and availability. A holistic policy approach is needed which does not overlook the economic drivers of infrastructure investment and the importance of continued competition in delivering for consumers.

The government should undertake the following:

- Develop a strategy on what needs to be done to encourage adoption of gigabit-speed connectivity, building on the government's success of increasing coverage.
- Introduce a government-led national campaign to support the digital transformation which outlines the benefits that the adoption of gigabit capable infrastructure will offer to consumers, businesses and the resulting societal gain.
- Introduce additional full-fibre roll-out initiatives as a result of the Digital Inclusion Action Plan rather than simply reusing previous announcements, to demonstrate the vital importance of connectivity in overcoming digital exclusion.

The availability of cutting edge, fit-for-purpose and affordable telecoms infrastructure must not be taken for granted. Encouraging adoption of full-fibre networks should be considered as fundamental to the government's growth and inclusivity agenda.

A competitive fibre market is a key enabler of the Government's growth ambitions.

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