

Full-fibre broadband and new telegraph poles

Public information and frequently asked questions

At a glance

New poles may be used where no suitable underground duct or existing pole is available. Most telecommunications poles are permitted development, but operators remain subject to notification, land-rights, street works, safety and regulatory requirements.

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Why is full-fibre broadband being installed?

Full-fibre broadband, also known as Fibre to the Premises or FTTP, uses fibre-optic cable all the way to a home or business to provide Gigabit capable broadband. This differs from older Fibre to the Cabinet services, where the final part of the connection normally uses the existing copper telephone line and speeds are <100Mbps. A full-fibre connection can support much faster and more reliable services and is designed to meet increasing demand for digital connectivity.

The UK Government's strategic objective is to ensure that gigabit-capable broadband becomes a foundational national infrastructure, comparable to transport, energy and water networks, enabling economic growth, productivity, innovation, public service transformation and digital inclusion.

The current government target is for 99% of UK premises to have access to gigabit-capable broadband by 2032, delivered through a combination of commercial investment and public intervention via Project Gigabit¹. Successive UK governments have increasingly viewed digital connectivity as a core enabler of national competitiveness rather than simply a telecommunications service. The Government's broader industrial and economic agenda increasingly places digital infrastructure alongside transport, energy and housing as a critical growth enabler.

Why might a broadband company need to install new poles?

In many areas, existing telephone and broadband lines are already carried either through underground ducts or overhead on telegraph poles. Where usable ducts or poles are already available, operators will often seek to use them. However, in some neighbourhoods, particularly some developments built before 1990, the original copper telephone cables were buried directly in the ground without being placed inside ducts. This is sometimes called Direct in Ground, or DiG, infrastructure. A directly buried copper cable cannot simply be removed and replaced by pulling or blowing a fibre cable through the same route, because there is no duct to contain it. The operator must therefore decide whether to:

- Excavate the highway or footway and install new underground ducts.
- Install poles and carry the fibre overhead.

¹ "Project Gigabit", Digital Infrastructure Oxfordshire, <https://digitalinfrastructureoxfordshire.co.uk/projects/project-gigabit/>, accessed 17 August 2026.

Installing new underground ducts requires excavation and other civil engineering work. This can be more expensive and disruptive than an overhead installation and also relies on there being sufficient capacity within the ground for the duct to be installed. In some circumstances, these technical constraints may mean that an operator concludes, after survey, that an overhead network is the only commercially and technically viable way of providing full fibre to the area.

The installation of poles is therefore not necessarily evidence that the operator has ignored existing infrastructure. It may mean that no suitable duct or pole is available along the route required to reach the premises.

Why can't operators always use existing poles or ducts?

Existing infrastructure may not be suitable or available because:

- There is no existing duct.
- An existing duct is blocked, damaged or does not extend along the required route.
- The duct does not have enough capacity for additional cables.
- An existing pole cannot safely carry the additional load.
- The position or spacing of existing poles does not support the proposed network design.
- The infrastructure belongs to another organisation, and an appropriate sharing arrangement is not available.
- Safety clearances, access requirements or engineering standards prevent its use.

Operators are encouraged to share existing infrastructure where practicable. However, operators are not generally required to prove to the local planning authority or Ofcom that infrastructure sharing is impracticable before installing a new pole. The decision will depend on the individual circumstances of the particular location and any agreement with the infrastructure owner.

Ofcom requires Openreach to provide competitors with access to its ducts and poles on fair and reasonable terms. This is commonly known as Physical Infrastructure Access (PIA). However, access does not guarantee that a suitable duct or pole exists, has sufficient capacity or can be used safely for every proposed connection. Other operators are not bound by the same requirement by Ofcom for sharing their own infrastructure.

Must fibre cables be installed underground?

Not in every case. The Electronic Communications Code (Conditions and Restrictions) Regulations 2003, indicate that underground installation should be used in most cases where it is reasonably practicable. However, amendments made in 2013 mean that this requirement does not generally apply to cables forming part of a broadband network, except in a national nature reserve or site of special scientific interest. The choice between underground and overhead construction is therefore usually an engineering and commercial decision for the operator.

Underground construction can cause greater short-term disruption because it may involve excavation, traffic management, footway closures and reinstatement work and is generally

better for the environment². Overhead deployment generally requires less excavation, although poles will have a continuing visual presence.

The local authorities have no general powers to insist that all new broadband infrastructure must be installed underground.

Do broadband companies need planning permission for new poles?

Telegraph poles used by authorised electronic communications operators are normally treated as permitted development. This means that a full planning application is not usually required. In England, the principal planning provision is Part 16, Class A of Schedule 2 to the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015³. It permits the installation, alteration or replacement of electronic communications apparatus, subject to the relevant conditions.

For ground-based apparatus such as a telegraph pole, the permitted development height limit is generally 15 metres. Most telecommunications poles are substantially lower than this.

Permitted development rights can also apply within protected landscapes and conservation areas. The existence of a special landscape or heritage designation does not automatically mean that every individual pole requires a full planning application. The operator must nevertheless comply with the conditions and restrictions that apply to its works.

What legislation and guidance govern the installation of poles?

1. Town and Country Planning legislation

The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015, particularly Part 16, governs the permitted development rights available to electronic communications operators in England.

2. The Electronic Communications Code

The Electronic Communications Code⁴, contained in Schedule 3A to the Communications Act 2003, provides the legal framework under which authorised operators may install, maintain, alter and operate electronic communications apparatus. It also governs the rights that may be needed where apparatus is placed on, under or over land.

3. Electronic Communications Code Regulations

The Electronic Communications Code (Conditions and Restrictions) Regulations 2003 impose conditions and restrictions on how operators exercise their rights. These include notification requirements and provisions relating to siting, underground apparatus, sharing infrastructure, safety and the minimisation of interference or obstruction.

² “FAQ – Poles,” Freedom Fibre, <https://www.freedomfibre.com/faq-poles>, accessed 17 August 2026; “Essential guide to underground cable ducting,” Pipelife, <https://www.pipelife.com/service/news-and-projects/2025/guide-to-underground-cable-ducting.html>, accessed 17 August 2026.

³ “The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015,” legislation.gov.uk, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2015/596/schedule/2/part/16>, accessed 17 August 2026.

⁴ “The Electronic Communications Code,” HC 1004, Session 2012-13, GOV.UK, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/law-commission-the-electronic-communications-code>, accessed 17 August 2026.

4. New roads and Street Works legislation

Where work is undertaken in a public highway, the operator may need the appropriate street works permit or notification from the relevant highway authority. This is separate from planning permission and relates to the management and safe coordination of works in the highway.

5. Industry siting guidance

Operators are also expected to consider the relevant cabinet and pole siting code of practice and current industry community engagement best-practice guidance. These contain recommendations on careful siting, visual impact, minimising disruption, consideration of existing infrastructure and communication with affected communities. Some elements of this guidance are good practice rather than independently enforceable legal duties.

Does the operator have to notify the council?

Before installing a pole under permitted development rights, an operator is required to give the local planning authority 28 days' notice of its intention to carry out the work.

The local planning authority may propose conditions relating to the installation. However, the regulations state that an operator does not have to accept conditions it considers unreasonable. There is no general mechanism allowing the planning authority to prevent a permitted pole from being installed simply because residents or the council object to it.

Notification should not be confused with a planning application. In most cases:

- The council is being notified of permitted development.
- It is not being asked to grant planning permission.
- There is no standard planning consultation process.
- The council does not have the same decision-making powers it would have for an ordinary planning application.

Must the operator consult residents before putting up a pole?

There is currently no general statutory requirement for broadband companies to undertake a formal public consultation with residents before installing a permitted-development telegraph pole.

However, voluntary industry best-practice guidance recommends that operators carefully consider the needs of local communities during the design, construction and operation of their networks. It also encourages operators to:

- Communicate their proposals clearly.
- Consider the visual effect of new poles.
- Minimise disruption.
- Consider local concerns.
- Engage constructively where objections are raised.

This means that community engagement is strongly encouraged, but the absence of a formal consultation does not necessarily make the installation unlawful.

Does a marker or notice have to be placed at every proposed pole location?

Marking or “staking” a proposed pole location can help communities understand where infrastructure is planned and is recognised as useful practice in siting guidance. However, there is no statutory requirement for operators to do so. Many operators instead attach a notice to the pole after it has been installed to allow objections to be raised, and prior to customers being connected.

Does the operator need the landowner's permission?

Public highway

Electronic communications operators have statutory rights to undertake street works on highways authority land. They do not normally need the highway authority's consent as the landowner in the same way as a private developer, although they do need to submit the relevant street works permits and notification to comply with New Roads and Street Works Act (NRWSA), and any local highway-management guidelines and safety requirements.

Private land

Where a pole is to be installed on private land, the operator will normally need an agreement with the landowner. This is often called a wayleave or a Code agreement.

If a voluntary agreement cannot be reached, the Electronic Communications Code contains a process through which an operator may seek rights from the court or tribunal. Whether rights are granted will depend on the applicable legal tests and the particular circumstances.

Planning permission and land rights are separate matters. A pole may benefit from permitted development rights but will still require an appropriate land agreement on private land.

Can a cable pass over private land?

The Electronic Communications Code allows cables to pass between poles over private land in certain circumstances without the landowner's permission, provided that:

- The operator does not need to enter the land.
- The cable is at least 3 metres above the ground or 2 metres above a building.
- The cable does not interfere with a trade, profession or employment carried on from the land.

Other installations or access requirements may require a land agreement. Anyone concerned about their individual property rights should obtain independent legal advice.

What obligations do broadband operators have?

Depending on the location and nature of the works, operators are expected or required to:

- Operate under the appropriate Electronic Communications Code powers.
- Comply with the conditions and restrictions applying to those powers.
- Give the required notice to the local planning authority.
- Comply with the limitations and conditions of permitted development.
- Secure the necessary rights before placing apparatus on private land.
- Obtain relevant street works permits or provide the required notifications.

- Coordinate works with the highways authority where appropriate.
- Protect the safety of workers, road users and the public.
- Avoid creating an unlawful obstruction of the highway.
- Comply with applicable cable-height, clearance, structural-loading and electrical-safety requirements.
- Consider underground installation and infrastructure sharing where reasonably practicable.
- Minimise damage and disruption.
- Reinstate excavated highway or land to the required standard.
- Respond appropriately to complaints or reports of unsafe, defective or non-compliant work.

Operators must assess matters such as safe working access, pole loading, cable clearances and proximity to electricity infrastructure. The existence of another pole does not automatically mean that it is safe or technically practicable to attach an additional fibre cable to it.

What is the council's role in Oxfordshire?

- The local planning authority (the City and District councils⁵) receive the operator's statutory pole notification and may consider whether any conditions are appropriate.
- The County Council's highway authority manages and coordinates street works and can act where apparatus or works unlawfully obstruct the highway, create a safety problem or fail to meet relevant street works requirements.
- The County Council's digital infrastructure team, where applicable, may help communities and operators communicate, but it does not normally design, approve or own a commercial operator's network.
- None of the councils have the power to direct a commercial operator to build in a particular area, select a particular route, use underground ducts or remove a lawfully installed permitted-development pole simply because it is unpopular.

Local authorities therefore have limited powers to intervene in decisions about individual poles, although they may act where there is a specific planning, highways, safety or regulatory issue.

Who decides exactly where a pole will be located?

The broadband operator is responsible for designing its network and selecting proposed pole locations. The design may take account of:

- The premises to be served.
- The availability and capacity of existing poles and ducts.
- Cable-span and clearance requirements.
- Highway and pedestrian safety.
- Underground utilities.

⁵ In Oxfordshire, responsibility for most planning applications sits with five local planning authorities: Cherwell District Council, Oxford City Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council. Oxfordshire County Council is responsible for minerals, waste and certain county council development planning matters.

- Access for installation and future maintenance.
- Trees and other physical obstructions.
- Land ownership.
- Visual impact.
- The cost and deliverability of the network.

The operator should consider reasonable alternatives, but this does not mean that every suggested alternative will be technically, legally or commercially feasible.

Can residents stop a proposed pole?

Residents can raise concerns with the operator and ask it to consider an alternative location. However, an objection does not give residents or the local authority an automatic right to prevent a pole that is lawful permitted development. If the operator concludes that an underground or alternative route is not viable, it may retain the proposed design or decide not to include that part of the community in its network build. Operators have, in some cases, altered or cancelled deployments in some areas following local opposition.

It is therefore helpful for concerns to be specific and evidence-based. For example:

- The pole would obstruct the footway.
- It would restrict visibility at a junction.
- It would impede access to a property.
- There may be an overlooked existing duct.
- The pole appears to be on private land without agreement.
- The position creates a particular safety issue.
- Another nearby location may reduce the impact without preventing service delivery.

What should I do if I am concerned about a proposed or newly installed pole?

1. Contact the broadband company first

Use the contact details shown on a site notice, works board, letter or the operator's website. Provide:

- The road name and nearest property.
- The pole number, if available.
- Photographs.
- A clear description of the concern.
- Details of any suggested alternative location.

2. Contact the local planning authority

Contact the planning authority if you believe:

- The apparatus exceeds permitted-development limits.
- The required notification may not have been submitted.
- A relevant planning condition or restriction has not been followed.

3. Contact the highway authority

Report the matter to the highway authority if the pole or associated works:

- Obstruct the carriageway or footway.
- Restrict visibility.
- Create an immediate highway-safety concern.
- Interfere with an access.
- Involve defective or incomplete reinstatement.

4. Contact Ofcom where appropriate

Ofcom is responsible for enforcing the Electronic Communications Code's Conditions and Restrictions Regulations, and the specific infrastructure-sharing obligations applying to Openreach and KCOM. Members of the public and local planning authorities may raise concerns with Ofcom about compliance with those rules.

5. Obtain legal advice for private-land disputes

Disputes about Electronic Communications Code rights, other than enforcement of the 2003 Regulations, are generally matters for the courts or tribunal rather than Ofcom. A landowner who believes an operator has entered private land or installed apparatus without the necessary rights should obtain independent legal advice.

Key points at a glance

- New poles may be needed where there are no suitable underground ducts or existing poles.
- Directly buried copper lines cannot simply be replaced by blowing fibre through the same route.
- Installing new ducts may be more disruptive and significantly more expensive than an overhead network.
- Telegraph poles are normally permitted development and usually do not require a full planning application.
- The operator normally has to give the local planning authority 28 days' notice.
- The council's receipt of a notification is not the same as the council granting planning permission.
- Operators are not generally required to undertake a formal resident consultation, although community engagement is strongly encouraged as good practice.
- Operators should consider existing infrastructure, but sharing is not always technically or safely practicable.
- Private-land installations normally require an agreement with the landowner.
- Street works, highway safety, worker safety, cable clearances and reinstatement requirements still apply.
- Residents should normally raise concerns with the operator first, giving precise location details and evidence.
- Objection to a pole does not automatically mean that it can be prevented or that the service will instead be placed underground.