

An Roinn Comhshaoil,
Aeráide agus Cumarsáide
Department of the Environment,
Climate and Communications



26th May 2021

Ms Éilis Fallon
Secretariat
Committee of Public Accounts
Leinster House
Dublin 2
D02 A272

Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Vote 29)
Ref: S0305 PAC33

Dear Ms Fallon,

I refer to your letter dated 23 April last following discussions at the Public Accounts Committee meeting on 23 March 2021 on previous correspondence received from this Department.

The information requested in the aforementioned letter is set out below.

Should you require any clarification or additional information, please do not hesitate to contact Ms. Catherine McGinty in my Department, by email at Catherine.McGinty@DECC.gov.ie or by phone at (01) 6782423.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Griffin
Secretary General

1. Update and further details regarding end user cost and measurement of affordability in respect of the Analysys Mason MANs report

We understand from reviewing the transcript of the Committee's meeting that the issue raised relates to leveraging existing MANs infrastructure to reduce costs on the National Broadband Plan (NBP).

The NBP is based on a principle of reusing existing telecoms infrastructure wherever possible, as required by State Aid Guidelines, in order to speed up the rollout of the NBP and to avoid duplication of network build. This involves establishing rental agreements for the use of telecoms poles and ducts. ComReg has published a Consultation and Draft Decision on the proposed pricing methodology and indicative prices for access to eir's poles and ducts.

The Committee can be assured that the Department is working with NBI to continuously monitor costs in order to minimise the cost of the NBP initiative to the Exchequer.

Under the NBP, connection costs to households will not exceed €100 and it is expected that in many instances retail service providers will not charge a connection fee. Ultimately end-user monthly cost of broadband for households in the Intervention Area should be on a par with those in the Non-Intervention Area as the State is effectively subsidising the capital costs required to make connectivity a reality for those in rural areas.

2. Evidence of value for money in relation to Eircodes, with particular reference to usage/measurements/outcomes

The Department will undertake an interim Value for Money Review at the end of this year that assesses the extent to which the existing commercial arrangements associated with Eircodes have represented value for money since the commencement of commercial business operations. The review will identify, and to the extent possible with reasonable accuracy, quantify relevant benefits. The Department will examine and report on the awareness and usage of Eircodes, and the contractual Minimum Service Levels for the Eircode operator, Capita.

3. Whether legislation is required to satisfy the Data Protection Commissioner's concerns in relation to the use of CCTV systems by Local Authorities (with specific reference to illegal dumping) and if so the timeframe for the legislation

The Department has sought legal advice in respect of the Data Protection Commission's (DPC) view that the Litter Pollution Act and the Waste Management Act do not provide a sufficient legal basis for the use of CCTV footage systems by Local Authorities. This process is ongoing and the output from it will determine whether further legislation is required. Should legislative changes become

necessary, they can be introduced through the new Circular Economy Bill which is on the Government's Priority Legislation Programme for the Summer Legislative session. One of the commitments contained in the Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy is to ensure that "all waste enforcement legislation will be "data proofed" so that all available and emerging technologies can be fully utilised in a manner which is GDPR compliant."

It is noted that the Waste Action Plan proposal is predicated on a wider future proofing and should facilitate the use of a range of Audio Visual Recording (AVR) equipment, as opposed to a narrower focus on CCTV only. The Department proposes that this approach can also encompass the DPC concerns and be facilitated under the Circular Economy Bill.

The combination of legislation and guidance should help to ensure that the processing of personal data may be carried out by Local Authorities tasked with enforcing litter and waste law, in order to protect our environment from the scourge of illegal dumping, while at the same time respecting the privacy rights of citizens.

4. Update and details in relation to the Lough Ree/Shannonbridge feasibility studies for green energy hubs

The Just Transition Commissioner made a recommendation in his first progress report, published in May 2020, that a study be undertaken in relation to the future potential of the ESB power stations at both Lanesborough (Lough Ree Power) and Shannonbridge (West Offaly Power) for the establishment of a dedicated Energy Hub in the Midlands. This was subsequently included as a commitment in the Programme for Government.

ESB has been participating in a number of working groups established under the Just Transition programme which looked at the future of the Midlands area following the closure of the ESB Midlands stations and the ending of the harvesting of peat by Bord na Móna.

One of the working groups looked specifically at how the existing infrastructure on the station sites might form a part of a future renewable energy hub. To that end, ESB commissioned an internal engineering report to examine how the power plants might be re-used in the future. Options reviewed included the possibility of using other types of fuel. The report was subsequently reviewed by Fichtner, an external international consultancy firm with acknowledged expertise in these areas. These reports have not identified any viable alternative use for the existing power plants.

While the management of ESB-owned facilities is the responsibility of the Board and management of the ESB, the company has informed the Department that it plans to lodge planning applications shortly to develop additional energy services at these sites. These will include synchronous condensers and energy storage capabilities at both locations.

Under Strand 1 of the Just Transition Fund 2020 a number of renewable energy projects have received finalised funding agreements including:

1. **Producing and Promoting Green Energy Birr & SW Offaly:** This project will focus on the production of biofuels on Midland farms – growing energy crops, utilising waste materials,

processing biomass including the use of Anaerobic digestion and informing the retrofitting and 'green heat' installation businesses.

2. **Alektra - Feasibility Study Stage 2:** The feasibility study aims to identify novel technologies suitable for building a hydrogen power plant in West Offaly. It will evaluate economic requirements, competition, social and environmental impacts, plant size, location, and construction requirements. Additionally, projections of hydrogen markets including new markets and source of revenue from selling electricity and system services will be assessed.
3. **Lanesboro Anaerobic Digestion Facility – Feasibility:** This feasibility study is being carried out to look into the potential establishment of an Anaerobic Digestion facility on lands on the current site of Lough Ree Power Station. This study will outline the benefits and impacts of the facility on the horticultural, agricultural, industrial and transportation sectors in the region and outline a programme of stakeholder involvement to ensure the transition to a socially and environmentally sustainable, low carbon economy.

A number of Strand 2 projects, currently in final verification stage with the Department, will also have a renewable energy focus. The majority of projects are expected to have grant agreements in place over the coming weeks, at which point the Department intends to publish further details on these projects.