

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



24 June 2021

REF:SO360 PAC33

Ms Éilis Fallon
Committee Secretariat
Committee of Public Accounts
Leinster House
Dublin 2 D02 XR20

By email

Dear Ms Fallon

I refer to your correspondence dated 19 May 2021 in which the Committee asked the Department to consider correspondence received from Mr Brian Flanagan in relation to the National Broadband Plan (NBP) and to provide a response to issues raised. The correspondence concerns the suggested use of Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite technology to augment high speed broadband rollout under the National Broadband Plan.

The NBP contract provides that a future proofed high speed broadband network will be deployed by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) to people living and working in the Intervention Area which covers over 544,000 premises. The NBP network will offer those premises in the Intervention Area a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. All counties will see construction commenced in the first 2 years.

The NBP contract was awarded following a detailed and comprehensive procurement process. In line with State Aid Guidelines, the procurement process was technology neutral meaning that the process did not specify a preferred technology. However, all bidders in the process proposed fibre as the preferable solution with the possibility of using alternative solutions in small number of circumstances (i.e. in 2-3% of cases). Bidders considered a range of different technologies (fibre, wireless satellite etc.) before coming to this conclusion. National and international expertise points to a fibre based solution as being the most economical way to address all premises with a future proofed solution over the 25 year term of the NBP Contract.

In terms of whether the low earth orbit satellite technology employed by Starlink could be used in the more remote or latterly scheduled regions of the NBP Intervention Area, the NBP Contract allows NBI to explore alternative technologies, including satellite technology, if they are deemed necessary to assist delivery of the contract requirements. However, in doing so NBI must ensure that any alternative technologies utilised do not negatively impact on having a reliable and robust network available for all premises within the Intervention Area. These considerations are a matter for NBI in the first instance.

I understand that the trial currently underway in the Black Valley area of Co. Kerry is a pilot project of Starlink's low earth orbit satellite broadband technology and that this is being



conducted by Starlink in conjunction with the Department of Rural and Community Development.

The Covid 19 pandemic has had an impact on the delivery of the NBP fibre network resulting in delays on delivery of aspects of the programme. Impacts include challenges with mobilisation of key contractors with restrictions on operations, supply chain and logistic delays (both nationally and internationally), as well as the recruitment of key personnel as NBI and its contractors scale up, including challenges associated with on-boarding and training people. Despite these challenges, good progress has been made by NBI in delivering the programme including (as of 3 June)

- a. Almost 223,000 premises surveyed across all 26 Counties. This figure is increasing weekly.
- b. Detailed designs have been received for over 174,000 premises.
- c. 322 Broadband Connection Points (public and schools) have been installed.

Main Fibre Build works are underway in 12 Counties covering a total of 43,000 premises and “Make Ready” Works (which involves works by openeir to prepare their existing poles and ducts for re-use by NBI and also tree-trimming of the route for new poles and overhead cabling) are underway in a further 6 Counties, covering an additional 52,000 premises.

Over 4,000 premises are already passed and available for connection. Recognising the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, NBI submitted a remedial plan to the Department in line with the contract. The remedial plan updated the milestones to be achieved and reforecast the number of premises passed in 2021 to just under 60,000 which now represents the contractual target. A further 70,000 premises will be in the various stages of the build cycle.

I trust that this is of assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Griffin
Secretary General