

Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development, and the Islands on the Development of Rural Hubs; and Broadband and Mobile Coverage in Rural Ireland

Wednesday 2 Dec 2020

Good morning.

I would like to thank the Committee for inviting the Department to address it this morning. With me today is my colleague, Turlough O'Brien, Assistant Principal Officer in the Regional Development and Innovation Unit.

Our appearance here is timely given the increased shift towards remote working that has taken place over the past 8 months as part of the country-wide response to Covid-19. This has highlighted the possibilities for remote working facilities to contribute to a greater regional distribution of jobs and to support a better quality of life for many people who previously might have spent long hours commuting.

A growing body of research and survey data from the likes of the Regional Assemblies as well as the Western Development Commission (WDC) and NUIG shows that, in spite of the obvious negative context of

this crisis, people are increasingly recognising the benefit of remote working for their own work/live balance. For example, recent research by the WDC and NUIG suggests that 84% of respondents to the survey want to continue to undertake some form of remote work after the current public health crisis concludes. Perhaps even more importantly, 7% of respondents have already made the move to the likes of Galway, Mayo and Roscommon amongst other counties. A further 23% of respondents indicated that they would consider relocating, with most of those being from Dublin.

Clearly, a seismic shift in how people think about work has occurred and, as many commentators have publically indicated, there is unlikely to be a full return to the way things were.

The Department was established to advance and support the development of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland and to promote long-term social and economic development in rural areas and the regions.

Our role is to work with local authorities and rural stakeholders to advance the rollout of telecommunications infrastructure and the adoption of digital technologies. The Department of Environment,

Climate and Communications retains overall responsibility for the rollout of Broadband, including the NBP, and Communications infrastructure, such as 5G.

One of the areas that we are particularly focused on is the promotion and development of remote working through a wide range of projects and schemes such as LEADER, the Town and Village Renewal Scheme and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF).

The first and second calls of the RRDF have approved 36 projects that are delivering remote working or enterprise hubs in rural towns and villages. Examples include the gteic@An Spidéal hub in Galway and the Ennistymon Digital Hub and Multi-Service Centre in Clare.

The Department has also provided €570,000 through LEADER and €683,000 through the Town & Village Renewal Scheme to develop remote working, conferencing and other facilities. Budget 2021 allocated a further €5 million for the development of remote working facilities at BCPs and Digital Hubs. The details of how this money will be disbursed is under active consideration within the Department and an announcement is expected in the New Year.

At a national level, the Department has adopted a lead role through the establishment of a National Hub Network Interdepartmental Working Group under the Chairmanship of the Department's Secretary General, Mr Kevin McCarthy. This work aims to complement the efforts of Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in developing a Remote Work Strategy, which I understand is well advanced and is expected to be published in December.

This Working Group will initially develop and map a national dataset of hub infrastructure, facilities and services throughout the country.

It will also work to identify current and capital funding and revenue generation arrangements across the network, identify any funding gaps and consider future investment requirements and opportunities.

Other activities that the Working Group will undertake will be to identify barriers to developing the network, raising awareness and identifying appropriate development models for remote working facilities.

The Working Group will build on the classification model developed under the Atlantic Economic Corridor Hub Project. This collaborative

effort involving the WDC, the 10 local authorities in the AEC region and the Department has, to date, identified, surveyed, mapped and engaged with over 100 hubs in the AEC region. This work is detailed in the associated slide deck.

The WDC has also developed a comprehensive strategy for the network, which the Minister will shortly publish, and a number of supports to drive the development of the AEC hubs into a collaborative eco-system.

One such support will be a suite of shared applications currently being developed. These will include a common booking engine and Client Relationship Management system and an online community platform to allow for the exchange of ideas and best practice.

The Broadband Connection Point (or BCP) initiative was established in order to ensure that remote areas are provided with some access to high-speed broadband in advance of the full rollout of the NBP. BCPs are located in some of the most isolated and rural communities throughout the country including islands off Donegal, Mayo, Galway and Cork.

BCPs represent an opportunity for local communities to use the newly delivered connectivity to provide a range of innovative services for their communities, including eHealth, education, remote working and the promotion and development of the creative industries. We are working closely with our appointed Retail Service Provider, Vodafone, to roll out multiple programmes through the BCP network in 2021.

In addition to developing remote working facilities, the Department has been actively supporting the development of rural digital infrastructure and improving mobile connectivity through the work of the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce since its establishment in 2016.

The original Taskforce identified more than 40 actions, of which some of the most impactful have been the:

- Appointment of Broadband Officers in all local authorities to remove obstacles to infrastructure deployment.
- Laying of more than 1,000 km of ducting by Transport Infrastructure Ireland, enabling operators to expand their networks along the road network route.

- Publication by ComReg of a composite national outdoor coverage map to inform consumers and assist them in choosing the best operator for where they live and work.
- Development of new advertising guidelines to ensure that certain marketing terms used by telecommunications operators convey clear meanings to consumers.

Options for the future of the Taskforce are under active consideration in both Departments. Suffice to say that the low-hanging telecommunication challenges have been addressed, and what remains is more complex, more involved and will require a greater level of collaboration amongst stakeholders.

Finally, I have also included in the slide deck a number of mobile phone coverage maps from ComReg which show 2G, 3G and 4G coverage across Ireland – the availability of these maps for consumers is as a direct result of the work of the Taskforce.

Thank you for your attention this morning.