

Opening Remarks

**Mr Fergal Mulligan and Mr Patrick Neary, Department of Environment,
Climate and Communications**

Joint Oireachtas Committee Meeting, Wednesday 16 December 2020

I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to address it on matters relating to broadband and mobile coverage in Rural Ireland. My name is Patrick Neary and I am the Chief Technology Officer in the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. I am joined by my colleague, Mr Fergal Mulligan who is Programme Director for the National Broadband Plan. We look forward to discussing these matters with you today.

The Covid 19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of high speed, quality, reliable broadband and mobile coverage to ensure that citizens in rural Ireland can participate in remote working, on-line schooling, shopping, critical video calls, both business related and social, and a plethora of other online activities which most now take for granted.

With respect to mobile coverage and in order to assist mobile network operators (MNOs) to meet demand and maintain service levels during the pandemic, Regulations were made in April under the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1926 enabling ComReg to release additional rights of use for the radio spectrum on a temporary basis. This framework, established with the consent of the Minister, enabled mobile network operators to create additional

capacity across their mobile networks and accommodate the increased demand which arose earlier this year particularly in suburban and rural areas.

Licences were issued to the three mobile network operators, Three, Vodafone and eir on a temporary basis for three months. A further temporary licensing framework was put in place in October enabling licences to be issued for three months and ComReg is currently considering applications under this framework to allow licences to continue into March 2021.

Also in April this year, the main electronic communications providers signed up to a common set of commitments to assist and help their customers to stay in touch and work from home during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

In light of the pandemic, operators, both fixed and mobile, reviewed their network capacity against the voice and data traffic demand and put in place measures to mitigate the risk of network congestion. As a consequence, and to the credit of the industry, the networks have remained stable throughout this period with their infrastructure remaining resilient despite being tested in an unprecedented manner. As members will appreciate providing telecommunication services, including mobile services, is a matter for the relevant service providers operating in a fully liberalised market regulated by the Commission for Communication Regulation (ComReg), as independent Regulator.

As set out by our colleagues from the Department of Rural and Community Development to this Committee on the 2 December last, the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce has been a driving force for improving access to telecommunications services nationwide from the commercial sector. It has completed over 70 targeted actions to alleviate connectivity barriers and enhance information provided to consumers and continues to tackle issues impeding the rollout of essential infrastructure in rural areas.

With respect to broadband, of the 2.4 million premises across Ireland, 77% of premises now have access to high speed broadband of more than 30Mbps. NBI are now tasked with addressing the remaining premises through the National Broadband Plan State Intervention. In many parts of the country, very high capacity networks are now becoming the norm. For example, 40% of subscriptions are for services offering speeds in excess of 100Mbps. There are over 225,000 fibre subscriptions across the country, representing a 55% increase on last year. It is encouraging to note that a number of industry players have announced further investment plans in high speed broadband. This includes eir who have said they will rollout fibre to a further 1.4 million premises bringing their fibre deployment to some 1.8 million premises.

SIRO are currently completing the first phase of their fibre deployment which will see 375,000 premises passed with gigabit services and are actively considering the scope of Phase 2 of this project. Virgin Media are offering 250Mbps as a standard offering with 500Mbps and 1Gbps available to many of their customers across the over 1 million premises that they cover. They too are continuing to invest in upgrading their network. Many other network

operators and telecom service providers across the State also continue to invest in their networks. I will now hand over to Mr Fergal Mulligan who will outline the position on the National Broadband Plan.

The State has stepped in to ensure homes and businesses that are not receiving the reliability required will be assured of such a broadband service. This will be delivered by the State led intervention under the National Broadband Plan. As you know the contract that underpins this commitment was signed in November 2019 with National Broadband Ireland (NBI). NBI are the company who are currently well advanced in the design of the network, and they will build and operate this new high speed, high quality and reliable broadband network which will see minimum speeds of 500Mbps available to homes across rural Ireland, regardless of how remote those premises may be. This is a commitment that is unique when compared to many other jurisdictions across the world and, when combined with commercial sector investment, will see over 90% of premises across the State served with speeds in excess of 100Mbps by 2024, a coverage that was unimaginable only five years ago.

The Department's high speed broadband map shows those premises marked "Blue" where we understand high speed broadband services are currently available from the commercial sector. However, we understand that some homes and businesses have experienced difficulty getting a reliable high speed broadband service and we are proactively engaged in dealing with any such anomalies to ensure no home or business is left behind. It remains open to the

Department to bring additional premises into the NBI rollout plan where no commercial high speed broadband service is available.

NBI's rollout will bring an initial minimum standard 500Mbps service to all premises in the Intervention Area. It should be noted that this represents an increase from the original 150Mbps contracted. In addition, services of up to 1Gbps will be available to businesses and other users on request.

NBI has made significant progress in 2020 despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is worth noting that to date NBI has:-

- Surveyed over 145k premises across 26 counties.
- Completed detailed designs for over 105k premises
- Installed 220 Broadband Connection Points which are a key element of the NBP and will provide high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. This includes many primary schools.
- Signed contracts with 33 retail service providers who will deliver services to end users through the NBI network.
- Directly employed over 170 people and provided indirect employment for over 627 through its sub contractors.

In addition, an acceleration to the rollout of high speed broadband to some 679 schools across the State by the end of 2022 has recently been announced.

Build work has started in rural parts of Cork, Limerick, Cavan and Galway. NBI are currently in their test and trial phase where the first commercial connections will be made by the many retail services providers in early 2021, with the scale of connections to the network ramping up over the course of the New Year.

The need for access to high speed broadband by all has never been clearer. Recognising this, the Programme for Government specifically commits to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan. The Programme for Government also recognises that the NBP will be a key enabler to many of the policies envisaged particularly around increased levels of remote working and remote service delivery.

The Department is currently engaging with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of the NBP rollout to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the current plan to an earlier date. Any change requires detailed technical, commercial and financial analysis.

NBI has now established a dedicated team to investigate acceleration of the rollout from its current contracted schedule of seven years. Substantial work has been completed by this team to date, with further actions scheduled over coming months. However, the immediate priority is to ensure any delays as a result of Covid 19 experienced to date and that might arise in 2021 are mitigated by NBI to ensure the current rollout timelines are met. NBI is

working closely with all its build partners to address the many challenges presented by Covid 19.

The Department is aware that concerns have been raised by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communications Networks regarding the level of information available on the deployment of the NBI network. NBI is working to provide more detail on its website, with a rolling update on network build plans covering the next 18 months and it is expected that this will be available in the New Year.

I once again thank the Committee for inviting us here today and welcome any questions which we will do our utmost to answer. Where we do not have an immediate answer we would be more than happy to respond in writing as soon as possible following this session.