

**Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development
and the Islands**

Opening Statement Fergal Mulligan, Programme Director

Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications

15th November 2023

I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to attend here today to provide an update on the progress in delivering on the targets set out under Ireland's Digital Connectivity Strategy. I am joined here today by Kevin O'Donoghue, Principal Officer, Gavin Brown, Deployment Lead and Jacqueline Barron, Assistant Principal in the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

This strategy is a commitment that by 2028, every household and business in Ireland will have access to a gigabit broadband service, by 2030, 5G coverage be available to all populated areas, and by the close of this year, all schools and broadband connection points will have access to high-speed broadband.

The importance of high-speed, quality, reliable broadband is now more evident than ever. After the pandemic, Ireland has seen a significant transition to hybrid working and remote education for example.

Over the last number of years commercial investment in full fibre broadband has consistently increased. These commercial investments, together with the State backed investment across rural Ireland will see gigabit broadband rolled out across the State and to all citizens. Recent ComReg reports show a 33% year on year increase in full fibre subscriptions with over 600,000 premises now connected to a gigabit network.

The largest rollout is underway by eir who is rolling out a full fibre to the premise network to up to 1.9 million premises and to date we understand has passed over 1.1 million homes. SIRO has recently reached a milestone of enabling over 555,000 premises for full fibre and is on track to reach 700,000 premises by 2026 through a €1billion investment. Virgin Media recently announced a €200 million investment plan to upgrade its cable network to bring full fibre to up to 1 million premises over the next three years and recently passed 252,000 premises.

eir's 5G network rollout continues to expand, with coverage to over 70% of the population in all 26 counties. Vodafone's 5G network is currently live in selected areas across 26 counties

in Ireland. Three Ireland's 5G network has 85% population coverage. In Q4 2022, there were 988,000 5G mobile subscriptions, representing a 152% year-on-year increase and almost 18% of all mobile subscriptions.

The State's investment in National Broadband Ireland (NBI) is a key enabler for achieving the goals outlined in the Digital Connectivity Strategy. This commitment from Government of up to €2.7 billion will ensure that the future of gigabit connectivity is not just envisioned but is realised well in advance of the target of 2030 set down by the European Commission under their Digital Decade policy.

With the establishment of the Digital Connectivity Office in the Department, the Government are ensuring that every citizen has access to adequate broadband and voice services. This extends to bringing forward proposals under the recently enacted regulations around Universal Service for broadband and voice and working with stakeholders through the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce to ensure barriers to investment are removed where possible.

While NBI will provide full details of their progress to the Committee, we understand from their latest reporting to the Department that they have now passed over 200,000 premises, which is three months ahead of their revised annual target of 185,000. NBI believe they will pass over 300,000 premises by the end of 2024 which will represent over 50% of the rollout. NBI also reports that 60,000 premises have now been connected. To date, the level of connections is exceeding initial projections. NBI are connecting circa 3,500 homes each month and expect to have connected over 65,000 by year end. NBI have expressed confidence that they will complete the full rollout of fibre to all premises by the end of 2026.

The Government and NBI agreed to accelerate the rollout of high-speed broadband to some 672 primary schools across the State in the Intervention Area. NBI have confirmed that this acceleration will be complete by the end of 2023, with only 3 schools remaining to be connected. This will ensure that all schools across the State will have the necessary infrastructure to carry out their critical day-to-day educational activities unimpeded by poor broadband. There is some further work to be carried out by the Department of Education to install some equipment in schools before the broadband service goes live and this will be completed in the coming months.

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. 295 BCPs, which are publicly accessible sites, have been installed and the wireless high-speed broadband service has been switched on in these locations through service provider contracts

managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development. All of these locations will migrate to full fibre broadband once NBI has reached that area.

The Government Contract with NBI requires that every premises on every Island in the Intervention Area will be provided with access to gigabit connectivity as part of the overall NBI deployment. To date NBI has completed fibre deployment activity on 10 islands off Counties Donegal, Mayo, Galway and Cork, namely: Eighter, Eadarinis/Inishcoo, Rutland, Inishfree, Carrowholly, Inishlyre, Turbot, Inishturk South, Hare and Long Islands. Premises on these islands can now order broadband services with a minimum speed of 500Mbps. NBI are progressing a further 5 islands through the design phase - Owey, Dursey, Horse, Inishbiggle and Achillbeg Islands. Sherkin, Cape Clear and Bere Islands will be surveyed by the end of 2023. An additional 6 islands will commence fibre survey and design activity in 2024 – Tory, Arranmore, Inishmore, Inishere, Inish Méain, and Inishbofin. The Department continues to work with NBI and local stakeholders to accelerate the rollout to some of the larger Islands such as Valentia and Achill.

In closing, we will, through the combined efforts of all stakeholders involved, of which there are many, realise a digital Ireland that is inclusive, progressive, and leading on the global stage. We are taking on this task and this journey with the assurance that we are building not just for today, but for generations to come and to serve all citizens, regardless of how remote or rural.

We look forward to assisting the Committee members with any questions they may have today.

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