

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR AGUS LÍONRAÍ CUMARSÁIDE

### JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS

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*Dé Céadaoin, 25 Samhain 2020*

*Wednesday, 25 November 2020*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 11.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 11.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Cathal Crowe,	Jerry Buttimer,
Michael Lowry,	Timmy Dooley.
Steven Matthews,	
James O'Connor,	
Darren O'Rourke,	
Ruairí Ó Murchú,	
Duncan Smith.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputies Rose Conway-Walsh and Marc MacSharry.

Teachta / Deputy Kieran O'Donnell sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Broadband Connectivity and Telecommunications Issues: Eir**

**Chairman:** No apologies have been received. This meeting is part of the committee's continuing examination of broadband and phone connectivity and related matters. The committee is particularly interested in discussing the national broadband plan, regional and rural access to broadband, the roll-out of the Eir's fibre broadband network in Ireland, the handling of customer requests and complaints by Eir, and the difficulties posed by Covid-19. This discussion also relates to fixed line, mobile and broadband fibre connectivity. I welcome to today's meeting Ms Carolan Lennon, chief executive of Eir, and Mr. Edward Storey, director of strategy and corporate communications at Eir.

Witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or to engage otherwise in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if the statement of a witness is potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, the witness will be directed to discontinue these remarks. It is imperative to comply with any such direction.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or against an official either by name in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I call Ms Lennon, CEO of Eir, to make her opening statement on behalf of Eir.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I thank the committee for inviting me to attend today's meeting to discuss Eir's continued investment in broadband infrastructure in Ireland, together with our continued support for the national broadband plan, the challenges we have faced in operating our call centres, in particular, during Covid-19, and the progress we have made in resolving delays in customer care wait times.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on all our lives and has made very clear the fundamental importance of reliable connectivity for work, education, security and many other elements of life. Since April of this year, Eir has connected 150,000 new customers to fibre broadband and repaired 200,000 faults. Eir's team of approximately 1,000 field engineers has worked continuously throughout lockdowns and travel restrictions, following rigorous safety guidelines without losing a single day in the field. Given the challenging wider circumstances, we are extremely proud of our field force and of their commitment to carrying out their essential roles and of the milestones they have achieved which have so vastly improved the lives of many who, as a result of Covid-19, depend on Eir's essential services.

Eir completed its rural fibre broadband programme during the summer of 2019, delivering fibre to the home, FTTH, to approximately 340,000 rural homes and businesses on time and on budget. Eir invested €250 million to deliver rural fibre, and as a result of this investment, 40% of rural premises in Ireland entered the pandemic with the opportunity to access high-speed fibre broadband at no cost to the taxpayer. In recent months we have seen a significant increase in uptake on this network, which means, as a result of our investment, thousands of rural homes and businesses have been able to connect and continue to work and learn from home throughout this crisis. The pandemic has reinforced to us all how vitally important this connectivity is.

In July, Open Eir reduced the wholesale cost of a standard FTTH connection on this network by €70 and reduced rental charges by a further €5 per month, which has led to increased afford-

25 NOVEMBER 2020

ability of these packages for customers. We know members get representations from their constituents who have homes or businesses close to, but not included in the Eir rural fibre network and many of those people are desperate to be connected. I, too, receive those representations and, given the world we find ourselves in today, I sincerely wish we could connect them all. However, as a private company, we had a budget of €250 million to invest and we developed the programme in a way that connected the most people possible. We extended the programme from 300,000 to more than 340,000 homes and premises, ensuring we could connect as many as possible, but that programme is now complete.

Since then, the baton has been handed over to National Broadband Ireland, NBI, and our teams have moved on to our next fibre roll-out programme, which is the build of Ireland's fibre network, IFN. The IFN programme is bringing the same FTTH gigabit fibre broadband to thousands of households every month in other parts of the country. We are also supporting NBI fully in delivering the national broadband plan and we are confident that it will deliver fibre broadband to rural homes in the fastest possible way.

For those households within the national broadband plan, NBP, intervention area that have longer to wait for fibre broadband, we are investing €150 million to upgrade and expand our mobile network, and we continued to do so throughout the pandemic, to maximise the connectivity we can offer to customers. While not as reliable as fixed broadband, our 4G mobile data coverage enables speeds fast enough for most office-based workers to work remotely, and we have seen data usage increase by 80% over this time last year as more people use this network for high-speed data connectivity. We have been increasing coverage week by week throughout the pandemic as we push towards our target of outdoor coverage for 99% of the geography of Ireland.

Following the completion of Eir's rural FTTH programme last year, our networks team immediately turned to the €500 million investment in the IFN urban and suburban FTTH programme. Once this programme is completed within the next four years, Eir's gigabit FTTH network will extend to 1.8 million homes and business or approximately 75% of the total in Ireland. The total fibre footprint, including fibre to the cabinet, will be approximately 85%. In total, Eir has now passed 690,000 premises with FTTH broadband and is currently passing 60,000 premises per quarter, delivering gigabit fibre to enough people in those homes to fill Croke Park every month.

As is the case with the national broadband plan, Eir's FTTH network is future-proofed and, once completed, will push Ireland towards the top of the international leader board for broadband connectivity, making the country an even more attractive place to live, learn, work or to open a business. While Ireland competes with other countries for telecoms investment, our shareholders have committed to continuing to invest in the highest quality networks for as long as the regulatory environment ensures a fair return on that investment. The future regulatory challenge will be to ensure that there is a clear, cohesive policy developed that provides a clear path to allow legacy services to move to those more modern networks for the benefit of all users.

I will now move on to talk about customer care. Every business in Ireland has been challenged profoundly by the pandemic. Eir's challenge has not been in managing our network or keeping customers connected, it has been providing a quality care service to our customers at a time when our retail stores were closed, we moved hundreds of care agents to remote working overnight, we had an effective freeze on new hiring and training because of health regulations, and we saw a 30% increase in call volume versus the same time last year. The result was lon-

ger than acceptable wait times for our customers and I apologise unreservedly for that. I also welcome the opportunity today to explain why this has happened, what we have done, and what we will do to address these longer wait times, and to give my personal commitment that this is being resolved.

When I was appointed CEO of Eir in 2018, I was determined to make customer care a point of difference for the company. Like most large telecoms operators, Eir had long before followed the trend of outsourcing its customer care to specialist operators. This led to a continued high turnover of staff and customer service that was not up to standard. Two years ago, we decided to take those jobs back in-house to improve the experience for Eir's customers. We opened a new multimillion euro care hub in Sligo, creating hundreds of new jobs, and expanded our regional centres in Cork and Limerick, adding additional jobs in both those locations. Bringing these jobs back in-house was challenging. It took time, but it did deliver a better experience for our customers by this time last year. We believe it is the right long-term strategy for Eir and for our customers. The insourcing programmes across care and other customer-facing roles have brought hundreds of staff directly into long-term, sustainable, pensionable jobs, with good career prospects, in regional locations.

When the pandemic hit and the lockdown restrictions were put into operation, Eir was first to move all care centre staff to remote working to ensure their own safety. As a result, we also did not lose a single day of service throughout the pandemic. This time last year, our care agents, many of them only new to their roles, and used to the on-site support of their colleagues, trainers, IT and team leaders, were delivering call wait times for customers of five minutes or less and handling an average of 40 calls a day. Today, working from home, they no longer have that on-site support network, and so we have seen increased wait times and a reduction to 30 in the average number of calls handled. For example, if an agent faces a systems issue today, we have to courier their computer back to our IT team, which means that an issue that could have been resolved in a few minutes pre-Covid could now take a day.

Working from home can be challenging for care centre staff, most of whom are younger and often working from a shared apartment or a busy home with young children. Working in a bedroom or at a kitchen table is not the job that our staff signed up for, and we have lost 80 staff between March and July when we were unable to recruit due to lockdown restrictions. On top of this, during the period that our retail stores were closed, queries that would have been generally managed in-store now have to be managed by our care agents, for example, simple SIM card replacement. With more people working from home and relying on our service for meetings, home schooling and entertainment, queries have increased dramatically. This initially led to a 30% increase in calls to our centres versus the same time last year. From March to July, the restrictions meant we were unable to hire and train new staff to replace leavers and manage the increased demand. To account for the increase in calls and the lower productivity of working from home, we needed to add 70 new staff and instead we lost agents during the lockdowns. When all these factors are added up, the result has been unacceptable wait times.

The protection of jobs throughout this challenging year is an absolute priority for Eir. Staff in roles that could not continue as usual during lockdown, such as retail, were redeployed to support care. We introduced a wide range of additional routes to support customers, including online forms for logging faults and requesting refunds. When we reopened our retail stores, we extended the customer care services we offer in-store and introduced special hours for vulnerable customers, but as members know, footfall in retail is down across all businesses.

Once restrictions began to lift, we launched a national recruitment drive, and we have been

25 NOVEMBER 2020

hiring and training staff across Sligo, Limerick and Cork efficiently and while adhering to safety guidelines. Travel restrictions, social distancing and the requirement for initial on-site technical training limit the pace of hiring. These are real challenges facing all businesses as restrictions continue for longer than anyone anticipated. By the end of this month, we will have hired and trained almost 120 new staff. This is something we are proud of, particularly in light of the economic shock and job losses Covid has brought to Ireland. Today we continue to hire throughout the country.

Our average call wait times have decreased as a result of these measures, from an average of 30 minutes during the early stages of the pandemic to less than ten minutes today for our main care line. There are some variations to those times depending on the service required, but general care is the main point of customer contact. With new hires starting all the time, we expect the wait times on our main care line to average five minutes before Christmas. This is still not where we would like it to be, but resolving care wait times has been our number one priority and we have worked hard in an environment where every call centre in the country has longer than acceptable wait times because of Covid-19.

I do understand the frustrations of members as constituents contact them regarding Eir. We know the service we provide is essential, and for many, especially the most at risk, their phone and broadband is a lifeline to their loved ones and the outside world. We have more than 3,200 people working in Eir and every person, from the 1,000 field engineers through to our retail staff and care agents in Sligo, Cork and Limerick, hears these stories from friends, family and neighbours. We are all disappointed at the service levels we have provided. We are determined to rectify this and return wait times to acceptable levels and to continue to improve from there.

Once again, I thank the Chairman and members for the opportunity to address some of these points here today. I look forward to answering any questions they might have.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Lennon very much for coming in. The ComReg commissioner, Robert Mourik, said last night on the RTÉ “Prime Time” programme, on which Ms Lennon also appeared, that the problems with Eir were “so deep and so problematic” that customers had been “left out in the cold”. He said this is unacceptable. In fact, he said that the number of complaints were exceptional relative to other providers. Of the 5,354 complaints to ComReg between July and September, two thirds, or 3,477, were about Eir. Eir is exceptional when compared with other service providers. In the fixed-line area, there were approximately 2,900 complaints about Eir compared with a fraction of that for other service providers - 294 about Sky, 319 about Virgin and 74 about Vodafone. In the mobile area, 955 complaints were about Eir compared with half of that for Vodafone. I want Ms Lennon to give me her reaction to the comments by the ComReg commissioner, Robert Mourik, on the “Prime Time” programme last night. He said two things; he said the level of complaints to ComReg about Eir were unacceptable and furthermore he said customers were left out in the cold. He added that the level of complaints was exceptional relative to the other providers of mobile, broadband and fixed-line services. What is your reaction to that, Ms Lennon?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** There are three questions there so I will start with the first one, about my reaction to what Mr. Mourik said last night. First of all I was surprised, because my director of customer service and I have met Mr. Mourik and one of his team every fortnight since, I think, June to update them on exactly what has been happening, what the issues are and what we have been doing to address them. In those meetings, he has absolutely specified how important it is that we fix them but certainly I have never heard language like that in all those months of that conversation, so that was a surprise.

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**Chairman:** Is that out of keeping with the level of complaints?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I will come to the level of complaints. I am not-----

**Chairman:** Do you disagree with Mr. Mourik?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** No, what I said was I was surprised to hear that because we had been talking all summer.

**Chairman:** However you said you had not heard language like that. Implicit in that-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** No, I had not heard that.

**Chairman:** Does that mean you disagree with his assessment?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I was surprised he had not raised it and that he raised it last night but that is up to him. On the level of-----

**Chairman:** Do you disagree with him?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Yes. I do not believe-----

**Chairman:** Why?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I do not believe that Eir customers have been left out in the cold, as he said. I am not-----

**Chairman:** Even, Ms Lennon, if a person is waiting 40 minutes to be heard? Many of them are elderly people. On the fixed-line business, many of them are reliant on having the fixed-line operating for their alarm systems. I have had various people on to me-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Yes, I am sure.

**Chairman:** -----and one lady, a restaurateur, had her fixed-line go down last March. It is still not repaired. She continued to be billed and eventually she had to stop the standing orders. We have a litany of them so the question is how can you then say that Eir customers have not been left out in the cold?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Let me answer the rest of your questions and I will come back to that. Am I surprised at the high level of complaint? No, because I have been getting them, we have been dealing with them all summer. The reason Eir gets a lot more complaints than everybody else is because it is our network. We have almost 1 million customers on that network.

**Chairman:** I am sorry Ms Lennon-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** That is a fact. We connect-----

**Chairman:** -----if one has a bigger business-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** No, it is not about that. If a repair goes wrong, or a member in here wants access to fibre broadband for a constituent, they generally do not contact the head of Sky or Vodafone, they contact the head of Eir. We do all the repairs and all the installations, so as a result we are likely to get more complaints. That is not to excuse it. I am not saying that the service we offered over the summer was acceptable or even that where we are now is acceptable. It is not and I absolutely accept that. However, there is-----

25 NOVEMBER 2020

**Chairman:** I am sorry, Ms Lennon. The point I take exception to is you using the excuse that Eir is bigger than everyone else. Eir has a large number of customers, it has the fixed-line business and it owns the fibre network and whatever. By definition, therefore, Eir is going to get more complaints as it is a bigger business.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Yes, absolutely.

**Chairman:** Also, Sky and others are paying Eir for the use of the its network

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I am not arguing with that.

**Chairman:** That is, therefore, an unacceptable excuse. I would go so far as to say it does not stand up to scrutiny; it is a lame excuse.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I do not accept that. We did 200,000 repairs between April and November so if you are asking me to put my hand on my heart and say that every single repair will be perfect, I cannot because there will be issues. We will make mistakes. We have got 3,200 people, they will make mistakes. I will make mistakes and you will make mistakes but the reality is we did 200,000 repairs. We made-----

**Chairman:** Can I finish-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We did 150,000 connections and they did not all go perfectly either. It is not an excuse and when something goes wrong the minimum customers should expect is to be able to pick up the phone, get through to us and for us to fix the issue and they have not been able to do that. I accept that.

**Chairman:** Can I say something? I have two more points. The first is that I got the impression that you believe staff are an issue, is that right? Ultimately the buck stops with-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** No. Ultimately the buck stops with me. I do not believe staff are an issue at all and I have never said that.

**Chairman:** Second, I have two quick questions. First, I rang this morning and I checked on times. One was below ten minutes but the other was 29 minutes. There are still many late calls-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Agreed.

**Chairman:** You accept that. Second, what is Eir doing to remedy that? When will it be done and how is it doing it?

Moving to broadband, the gap intervention areas are, as you are well familiar, areas where Eir provided fibre broadband and then discontinued. We had representatives of National Broadband Ireland, NBI, before us this time last week. They are agreeable to working with Eir to see if it can effectively speed up the connection of these gap intervention areas, where there are customers who are looking over their ditch at their neighbours with broadband, into the Eir fibre network. Is Eir willing to discuss such an arrangement with National Broadband Ireland to connect these people who have been left out in the cold by Eir? We have been in touch many times, trying to get the extended connection. Eir was doing it for a period but certainly over the past year or two that changed. I put those two questions. What is Eir doing to remedy the complaints about wait times so people can get access to Eir? It is a communications company so by definition it should be promoting quick access. Second, will Eir work with National Broadband

Ireland to look to expedite connection of the people in the gap areas, where there is Eir network literally 100 yd. up the road, or less? Will Eir work with National Broadband Ireland to allow it to connect them to Eir's fibre?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Starting with the first one about what we are doing on the contact centre wait times, we must factor in three things: how many calls we get, how many people we have answering the calls and how many calls they can handle in a day. Those are pretty much the dynamics with the wait times. As I said, we lost up to 80 staff during the pandemic. They just found it too difficult working from home. I am not blaming them at all. I understand completely they signed up to a job in a contact centre surrounded by colleagues and team leaders and suddenly they found themselves-----

**Chairman:** Why did Eir not have contingency plans in place, with Covid coming? The company must have known it was going to be difficult.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Of course we knew it was going to be difficult. When we first moved people home, we did not know if that was going to be for two, three or nine months. Initially, in April, our productivity levels were actually pretty good, people were relieved to be out of a contact centre environment and there was a novelty factor to working from home. However, as that progressed, a number of people said it was not for them, so they left. One could not hire safely and train safely during that time, so that gave us a gap. Over time we have also seen the number of calls people have been able to handle from their home in a day decrease, and that is in no way a criticism of them. I understand completely how difficult it must be for them; they do not have tech support, some of them do not have great connectivity where they are and we did not hire them to be working from their homes. To be fair to them, we hired them to be working from a contact centre. Of course, we also saw an increase in the number of calls. What are we doing about it? On hiring, once the restrictions were lifted we started hiring. We have hired 120 people. We are not done yet and we continue to hire. Six people start on our tech support team this week and we have more people starting on the care desk. We will continue to hire until we have enough people to manage that. That is what we are doing. It is much slower than it used to be. We hire in teams of five now because that is what we need to do to keep to the 2 m and all of that. We used to be able to have much bigger teams when we were recruiting in the past. That is the first point.

The second point is that we are working with the teams in their homes, we are trying to make things easier for them with the technical stuff, we are trying to keep them motivated and we are trying to encourage them. We are trying to put our arms around them and ensure they do not feel all on their own in dealing with customers who, obviously for good reasons, are not happy with Eir. They are at the front line of that. We are absolutely trying to increase that productivity but are doing it in a way that is very conscious of what our staff are putting up with.

The third point is trying to take calls away from the contact centres. We have briefed everyone in retail on care issues. All the retail systems have been updated to be able to deal with care queries. We have introduced hours in retail before 11 a.m. for vulnerable users to try to give people another outlet to ring, and not just the contact centre. Unfortunately, not just in our business but across lots of businesses, with the current restrictions retail footprint is down so we are not getting many people going into our stores at the moment. We have also put many of the key activities, like getting a refund and reporting a fault, online so customers can use an online form.

**Chairman:** I will let my colleagues follow up on that. Will Ms Lennon deal with the broad-

band and the intervention areas? Will Eir interact with National Broadband Ireland?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** No, because that is National Broadband Ireland's project now. You said we discontinued. We did not discontinue. We signed a contract with the then Minister to do 300,000 rural homes. We actually did 340,000. When we finished that project, there was a tender and NBI won the tender. It is now NBI's role to do that intervention. I get emails from Members and customers about this every day but we have finished our roll-out in rural Ireland. We are supporting NBI by getting our duct and pole infrastructure ready for it. We will continue to do that, but we are now building a national network across the rest of the country and that is where our network teams have gone. It is now NBI's role to take this up and fill those gaps.

**Chairman:** If NBI were to approach Eir and ask to come to an arrangement to link into its network 100 yd up the road, would Eir say no?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Yes, because it is 100 yd up the road here and another there. That is another ten or twenty houses, and suddenly we are not doing 340,000 houses but 400,000, which is an intervention that NBI is getting a good Government subsidy to do.

**Chairman:** I regard that as unacceptable but I will let my colleagues follow up on it. I call Senator Dooley.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** I welcome the presentation. To follow up on the Chairman's point, the difficulty many people have is that they see fibre from Eir on a pole 30 m from the entrance to their homes and they cannot understand clearly why Eir is not in a position to provide a service to them. We are not asking it to go a mile or three miles up the road. We are asking it to review where its service terminates and to look within close proximity to that to see if it can do any extension. We all understand that NBI now has a contract but we would like Eir to consider that.

I will move on to the customer care issue because there is no doubt that people are concerned about their inability to report faults to Eir and get an adequate response. Ms Lennon said that Eir has had 200,000 faults since April. That seems a very high number. She has given an explanation for that but could it be argued that there has been a lack of investment in infrastructure over recent years? Is there a plan to make a greater investment there?

I ask Ms Lennon to address the issue of staffing. When I read her statement last night, I was shocked to hear that 80 people gave up their jobs between March and July. It seems bizarre that, when so many others were losing jobs, people would give up their jobs and the opportunity to work from home, albeit in a more difficult environment. I would like Ms Lennon to drill down into that a bit. How many staff does Eir have overall in that area?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Just short of 500.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** The number that left is 16% to 18% of that. That is enormously high. What are they being paid per hour?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We pay at the median. Our salaries are between €21,000 and €23,000, plus bonuses. We are the only contact centre in Ireland, of which I am aware, that pays sick pay and maternity and paternity benefit. These jobs are designed to attract people and keep them.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** Maybe I should not be as surprised if the wage levels are that low, the burden was that great and Eir did not intervene. I assume it did not intervene. Did it offer

any incentive to keep people on during the pandemic? Did it offer any increases in pay or any additional supports? I would think that 80 people, or 16% of Eir's customer care staff, throwing in the towel in the middle of a pandemic would have generated a response from someone at management level, saying they have a very serious problem. What was the response?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I disagree with the Senator. We have put 500 good, permanent and pensionable jobs into rural Ireland and that was our plan. We paid-----

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** Can I just stop Ms Lennon there-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** The Senator should let me finish. We paid bonuses to staff, including customer care staff, all through the pandemic.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** I get that.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We recently signed an agreement to increase people's pay over three years. We have employed every-----

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** With respect, that is not good enough. Ms Lennon can tell me what Eir has done from her perspective but it is not working from the perspective of the 80 people who walked out.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Maybe it is just too difficult. People, usually from Sligo, join when they are young and they have not worked in a contact centre before. They probably came from a retail store or hospitality. They join to work in that collegiate contact centre environment and then find themselves at home

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** It is about the law of supply and demand, as Ms Lennon well knows, and the marketplace for labour. If Eir pitches what it is offering to such a low level, it will get people who are less skilled and less committed to the company. I would argue that if Ms Lennon is serious about doing what she is talking about and putting in place permanent, pensionable jobs, Eir is going to have to pay more. Quite frankly, there is a direct correlation between what I pay in purchasing Eir's services and the care I get. If I am paying what I consider to be a decent amount of money for the service I am getting and, ultimately, I am not getting the service, I might argue, with some justification, that Eir is penny-pinching on the back end in terms of its customer care. The evidence is there in Ms Lennon's statement that somewhere between 15% and 18% of Eir's customer care staff walked out in the middle of a pandemic. If that does not raise a flag for Ms Lennon-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** It does not, because when our contact centre was outsourced in Dublin and was not managed by Eir, the turnover was 100%. All contact centres have high levels of turnover and we are transitioning-----

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** That is correct, and that is the reason Eir changed its management. I spoke to Ms Lennon about that at the time and I thought it was absolutely the right decision

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** It is the right strategy.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** Eir is bringing people in house, onshore, into same the time zone and into an environment where there is a better understanding between customer and customer care centre. The reality is that the pressure came on during the pandemic, though Eir could not have been able to see around that corner. I get that completely. However, it is clear to me that when the pressure came on, the staff were either ill-prepared, ill-trained or not suitable. I might

25 NOVEMBER 2020

argue, with some justification, that the reason for that is that Eir is low-balling on the pay side. It is not getting a quality or level of staff who are prepared to go the extra mile or who are capable of doing the work. Eir is going to have to look at its pay structure if it is going to get the kind of staff who can deliver the service the public wants.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We will have to agree to disagree. While the Senator is entitled to his view, I do not believe that is the issue.

**Chairman:** How many of the staff have tech skills?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Our technical support team is where we have our tech skills. There are probably in the region of 50 people on the tech support team.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** If I could just come in on one last-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** There is one other point I would like to make. We probably did make a mistake in choosing Sligo to build from a greenfield site. There was no history of contact centres in Sligo before we got there, which meant that when we were hiring local staff and people travelling from the environs, many of them came to us from retail or hospitality. They came in because they wanted to build a career in Eir and many of them are team leaders now. That was a challenge. It took us longer to train them and the centre in Sligo only opened last November, which is this time last year, so to be fair to them, they were in their roles a relatively short time when Covid hit and they found themselves at home.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** People will relocate if the offer is right but if Eir is pitching its offering at the retail and hospitality sector, it may not be getting people who are technically competent to meet the demands of the service.

This is a technical point but a particular matter has been raised with me by a constituent. The person in question had moved from the Eir service to a competitor, which was Sky in this case, but continued to be billed through a standing order from their account. The individual concerned lives independently but has both a physical and an intellectual disability. A family member became aware that the account was being debited on a monthly basis by two providers. They had moved to Sky and Eir was still taking the money. When a family member made contact, when it was noticed after a year, Eir sent a bill to continue the service for additional money and then followed up with a legal letter from a solicitor. In my business, we lose voters but providers lose customers. What system does Eir have in place to ensure that, when it loses a customer and that person moves to some other provider, it does not continue to take direct debits from the account concerned? Eir would have been paid by its competitor as well for the access to the line and so on.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We would not do that correlation because that would be done separately. When a customer leaves Eir, we cease the line and the billing associated with it is also ceased. If a customer who is in contract leaves, be that on a fixed line or mobile, there is usually a follow-up bill. It sounds like that cancellation was not properly processed. If the Senator gives me the details I will follow up on it. Normally, when a person cancels that all stops. That is usually what happens.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** If the customer moves to a competitor, does he or she have to go through a separate process of cancelling with Eir as well?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** The customer needs to tell us he or she is cancelling. I am not sug-

gesting the person referenced by Senator Dooley did not do that. He or she may well have done so but I do not know if he or she did so or not. If we cease a service, all of that should stop and, as I said, if a customer is in contract there may be an outstanding or final bill but that should be the end of it.

**Chairman:** People in Sligo have been in contact with a public representative, namely, me as Chairman of this committee, and they have stated that the ADTRAN call centre has been in Sligo for many years, as has Avantcard in Carrick-on-Shannon. Eir was offered training facilities in the local IDA and the Sligo Chamber of Commerce but it was not taken up. I ask Ms Lennon to come back to this at a later point.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I thank the witness for the presentation. I want to get a sense of the scale of the problem. The figures from ComReg represent only a fraction of the real problem. I ask Ms Lennon to outline the scale of the problem from her perspective, including the number of calls, types of calls and complaints versus queries. We have heard about an avalanche of calls. What are the numbers at Eir's end?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Over the last couple of months we have had approximately 230,000 per month. The number of calls was high in the early days of Covid but they were not all complaints. Some were inquiries regarding appointments and whether Eir was still open and active and others were from people working from home inquiring if they were on the right package, if they needed a bigger broadband bundle or if they could get a faster speed package.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Does Eir categorise queries?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Yes.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Can Ms Lennon give us that breakdown? I am interested to know how much of the contact is within the control of Eir, how much is related to services it is expected to deliver, be that breakdown or interruption of service, and how much of it is standard-type queries from people working their way around Eir's service.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I will break it down. We would have seen an increase at the start in the broad categories of whether Eir was still operational, if people could be connected, if they could review their package and so on. That has come down now and we are back at levels we would expect to be at now. In the early days, we were getting approximately 260,000. In the last couple of months, it has reduced to 230,000 calls. The calls were a combination of people contacting Eir to buy services, at 10%, and people engaging with credit management to pay their bills. One of big buckets is tech support, which is usually people wanting to report a fault or it can be that they want to report that a service that was great last week is no longer great and they want to know if this is related to their WiFi. It is for the trouble-shooting tech support team. Those people are qualified in terms of tech support. In terms of care, mostly it is a query about a bill, with people saying it is not what they expected it to be. We get a lot of calls regarding contracts to which people sign up for an initial 12 months on price X and then in month 13 it is price Y, which is a model in telecoms that we are trying to change. People are in the habit of ringing back and saying they want price X again.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Let us focus on the tech support. If I am a user and there is an interruption to my service that is a different challenge from straightening out my bill. In regard to tech support, has something in particular happened in that regard?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Taking the example of faults, which is a big driver of tech support,

ComReg sets targets for Eir every year to deal with faults and they do it across different areas, including at a national level, a regional level and so on. We have been under those targets all year. Senator Dooley mentioned that 200,000 faults is high. The average time to fix a fault is 1.6 days and the target is two days. This does not mean that some are not on the edges of that. The challenge on faults has not been that we have not had staff available to fix faults or that they have been taking too long to fix them, it is people have not been able to get through to report a fault. That has been our issue. We have 1,000 engineers who can go out to fix a fault.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Looking at October 2020 versus October 2019, there were similar patterns at in or around 230,000.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** There were better fault levels this year despite the fact we had nine storms. The issue is people not being able to get through to Eir to report a fault.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** On that issue, Ms Lennon said that Eir needed to take on additional 70 staff, but that it actually lost 80 staff, which means it was minus 150 staff. It then recruited 130 staff, so it is now minus 30 staff in terms of where it needs to be.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We are recruiting.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** How quickly will Eir have those people in place?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We should be fully up to our recruitment levels by the end of December. There is always an element of turnover in a contact centre. Our plan is to always have a contingency of staff that can fill in to manage that going forward, particularly because we have to recruit in such small numbers at the moment to ensure we are complying with health and safety guidelines. At the end of the year, we should have the right number of people. We need then to make sure that we keep that backfilled if we lose further staff. We will obviously love to get back into our contact centres but like everybody else we have no idea when that will be possible.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I want to put on the record that I do not accept that Covid-19 is an excuse. I hear what Ms Lennon says in regard to the recruitment embargo but I do not understand it. I think it is self-imposed between March and July. I do not know why Eir could not and did not recruit during that period. Eir is deemed an essential service. Other industries have had to live with Covid, some of them far more challenging and complex industries than telecommunications. For example, if we had the CEO of a hospital group here today, whose staff profile would not be that different from that of Eir in terms of working from home, staff losses and having to deliver services, he or she could not just say that the phone rings out and takes an extra half hour to answer. I do not accept that as an excuse. I think the type of customer service that is being provided by Eir, which is a hugely profitable company, is inexcusable.

That said, Ms Lennon has come here today and offered an apology and a promise that things will get better. I put it to her that Eir is hugely profitable. What does it propose to do for its loyal customers to make up for the poor service, frustration and anger they have been forced to endure because of poor customer service? We are in the run-up to Christmas. What is Eir going to do to reward those customers who have stuck with it in this most difficult year when it has, in my opinion, blatantly failed them?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We are going to fix customer service. That is what we said we are going to do. Our company has not provided the level of service we should have provided. There is no excuse there. I do have to remind everybody that we did also connect 150,000 customers

to the network and we did 200,000 repairs. We continued to build out a 4G and 5G network during the pandemic. We also continued to roll out fibre during the pandemic. My team did that. We talk about this in numbers such as 300,000 and so on. The reality is that within those numbers there are 27,000 farms, 800,000 individuals, 47,000 businesses, 300 business parks and 1,000 schools. Because of our investment and the work of my team everybody was able to get access to high-speed fibre broadband to stay connected during the pandemic. I am not in any way trying to justify the level of service that we have offered but to suggest nothing is going right is not correct. We will fix service. That is why I am here.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** In fairness, that is a promise of something in the future. I suggest to Ms Lennon that Eir, which is a hugely profitable company, needs to make a gesture of goodwill to its loyal customers. I ask the witnesses to consider these options. For example, it could offer a month's waiver for pensioners who are service-users of Eir. That is the type of initiative Eir should be taking to show the people that it understands the frustration through which it has put them. The company is in a position to do so and it would be a better gesture of acknowledgement than saying that this is what we have had to live with it but that it will be better in the future. Eir needs to put its money where its mouth is.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I will not lie to the Deputy; I am not going to do that. I do not believe we need to do that and I am not going to pretend that I will because that would be disrespectful to the Deputy.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Why not?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Because we do not need to. We need to fix customer service.

**Chairman:** That is neither the point nor the question. All the customers whom Eir has discommoded, including the pensioners-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We have dealt with all of those at an individual level.

**Chairman:** In many cases, the difficulties have still not been sorted. I told Ms Lennon about a restaurateur who has been waiting nine months but whose business's line is still not up and running. Deputy O'Rourke's question is fair. What will Eir do by way of a financial gesture of goodwill for these people?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We are not going to do anything.

**Chairman:** Why not?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We are a private company.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** For clarity, are we talking only about those who are affected or about everyone within the sector? I think Deputy O'Rourke is only referring to those who have been affected.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We deal with those who are affected. We do-----

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** If my service is down for a month-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We deal with those cases individually and Eir compensates them-----

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Does it?

25 NOVEMBER 2020

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** -----but that was not what was being suggested.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Is Eir compensating-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** If someone has had an issue with us and we have fixed the problem, of course we deal with them on an individual basis.

**Chairman:** That is not the question. Coming up to Christmas, will Eir not provide a financial goodwill gesture to people whose businesses have been discommoded? Many continued to be charged when their lines were not working. Surely Eir can make some kind of financial gesture in that regard.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I have never seen anything like the scale of frustration people have had with Eir. That is the truth of it. There are people in this room who have been in politics an awful longer than me but I have never seen frustration on this scale. Ms Lennon is underestimating the scale of people's frustration with her organisation by a power of ten. I believe this is needed. That is my opinion, which Ms Lennon can take or leave.

**Chairman:** I ask Ms Lennon to reflect strongly on this matter.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** I welcome the witnesses and thank them for their presence here today. Eir has a serious problem which has to be addressed. It has a problem with its customers, with its image and with its service and, if it does not move to correct these problems, it will do serious damage to the long-term future of the company. The only thing saving it at the moment is that its customers are effectively hostages to fortune. They are with the company and are signed up to it and have no avenue out. If they had, people would be deserting the company on a great scale.

Ms Lennon was appointed CEO in 2018. One of the major initiatives she identified was customer care. She said she wanted to ensure that she made a difference in respect of the company's customer care. She made a decision to move from outsourced and subcontracted customer care services to in-house customer care. I will not dispute whether it was the correct decision or not, but it is obvious to me and to all of us here that she did not think this decision through, that she did not understand the extent of the service Eir needed to provide and that she did not gear up for it. The proof of that can be seen in the opening statement where it says: "Once restrictions began to lift we launched a national recruitment drive and we have been hiring and training [...] while adhering to safety guidelines." This in itself tells me that the company never had enough staff in the in-house service to deal with the level of problems it faced. It is effectively reacting now rather than having had services prepared, designed and rolled out when they were needed.

All of us, as public representatives, are inundated with calls. I can only imagine what Ms Lennon's people are dealing with on the telephone. Out of pure frustration and anger, people become abusive when dealing with issues regarding Eir. The main reason for this is that they feel they are not getting a reaction. My impression is that there is massive incompetence in the customer care programme, which seems to be in an absolute shambles. Eir's customer care was bad when it was outsourced but, since being brought in house, it has gone from bad to worse. Does Ms Lennon consider the initiative she took to have been ill-thought-out and that preparation was lacking? Does she believe that, effectively, it has been a failure and that she needs to do something to correct it?

I acknowledge the point Ms Lennon made about making financial concessions. Connec-

tion fees were lowered to make them more affordable. It is not really a matter of affordability, however. It is about accessibility, maintenance and customer care. Those are the issues. People will gladly continue to pay what they are paying if they get a proper service. It is about a proper service.

What is Eir's relationship to National Broadband Ireland, NBI? In 2018, Eir put fibre broadband cables into Terryglass. I mentioned this to NBI when it was last before the committee. It is a beautiful village and tourist destination with a strong local economy. At the end of 2018, Eir's broadband infrastructure was 90% complete and the village was due to be fully connected in March 2019. In November 2019, the new national broadband plan was announced and Eir effectively walked away from the area. It never completed the works in Terryglass, even though they were 90% complete. Terryglass has now moved from a blue designation on the map on which Eir had indicated its plans to deliver services into the amber designation under the new plan. Terryglass will now have to wait to get broadband through the national broadband plan and NBI. Why would Eir, a very strong company, walk away from Terryglass and not complete these works? To the locals it looks like a reactionary commercial sulk as a result of NBI getting the new contract. Eir left the people of Terryglass without a service. It turned its back on them. Can Eir return to Terryglass and consider providing a service?

I know of multiple examples of the kind of gap the Chairman mentioned earlier. I live in the townland of Cormackstown, near Holycross. There is a gap area in the locality. There are 30 houses in this gap area, all of which seek connection to the service. Eir's fibre-optic cables run by both sides of this group of 30 houses. It would take very little to connect them to it but, again, Eir has refused point-blank to fill that gap. I do not understand the logic of that decision. Surely a company with a reputable reputation which is concerned with customer relations should be more considerate of people who do not have a service. Among the owners of those 30 houses in Cormackstown are farmers, people who work from home and business owners. They need a connection. I have been on to Eir's operations people on numerous occasions and I just get a stubborn point-blank refusal to join up these areas in the middle which have missed out.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** The Deputy asked whether insourcing has been a failure. We certainly made some mistakes, there is no doubt about that, and it was certainly a bigger challenge than we anticipated. The Deputy is right about that. It took longer for us to set it up than we expected, particularly the greenfield operation in Sligo. We will put our hands up in that regard without a doubt. Do I still believe having customer care in-house and outside of Dublin is the right strategy? I absolutely do. We did not implement the decision as well as we should have, but I still believe it is the right decision. We now have to get it right and prove that it was the right decision. We certainly made some mistakes along the way. We underestimated the effort required to get it up and running. I agree with the Deputy's points in that regard. We have to fix it but insourcing customer care at a location outside of Dublin was the right decision.

I will look specifically at the case of Terryglass. I do not know that example but I will have a look at it. In terms of the other examples, this comes back to a point I made earlier. We identified 300,000 homes, farms and businesses and this was the greatest number of premises we could pass for the budget we have in the timeline we had. In the end, we added 40,000 more, often on the back of people, including members of the committee, identifying homes that were close and could be connected relatively easily. We have finished that programme and have moved on to our national build. Our teams are in the middle of that. This is NBI's programme now. This is the whole point of the intervention footprint. It is up to NBI to fill in those gaps. When people write to me, we still check whether we missed a property or whether it is within

our 300,000 and is easy to connect but the reality is that most of these are clearly in the NBI intervention footprint.

**Chairman:** That was not the question asked by Deputy Lowry. Obviously, NBI is not going to get this for free. Eir is dealing with NBI in terms of Eir's phone network in any case so why would it not come to a commercial deal to allow NBI to tap into Eir's fibre broadband to deal with these gap areas?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** It is because my engineers are out building Ireland's fibre network, replacing the poles and laying sub-duct for NBI to get its routes ready. This is where my resources are and where my capacity is today.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** What Ms Lennon is effectively saying is that Eir has neglected those areas, NBI has since come in and Eir has moved on and has a new project so it is completely forgetting about those areas. We are pointing out blatant omissions that were made. I have a business that involves installation and maintenance and I cannot understand how Eir cannot delegate a crew within its organisation. It is a large organisation with a huge workforce. It is not as if it must go back and plan, do surveys and carry out preparatory work. The work has been done. It is literally cables from one corner of the room to the other corner and these areas in the middle do not have access. They will be waiting for years for NBI to get to them. If Eir made a decision to provide resources to do this, it could fill in many of these gaps without any big outlay on its part and would give a service to the people who have been deprived of one and, as a result, have been disadvantaged in their business and social lives and every other aspect of their lives. When NBI representatives appeared, they said NBI would co-operate with Eir and facilitate whatever wishes Eir had in terms of a programme to fill in these gaps. Will Ms Lennon give us an assurance that Eir will at least examine the possibility of filling in these black spots? That is what we are really asking.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I will certainly talk to NBI but one thing I need to be clear about is that there are no omissions. We did exactly what we said we would do and what we signed an agreement with the Minister to do.

**Chairman:** Is Ms Lennon willing to give the commitment to Deputy Lowry and the committee that Eir will look at this issue with NBI?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I will talk to NBI about it.

**Chairman:** Fine.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** However, I want to be clear that with regard to the 300,000 premises, we did exactly what we said we would do, on budget and on time. To say there were omissions is like saying we stopped halfway and said "Oh, we are finished." We did not do that.

**Chairman:** There are areas that have been left without coverage.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** That is not true. I think we handed back just under 1,000 homes.

**Chairman:** The facts are that there are areas without broadband coverage in gap areas. That is the issue.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I welcome our witnesses. In some ways, the witnesses and members on opposite sides of the room have similar jobs. Members face people at election time, they vote for us and they do not really know how good we are until they need us. It is the same

with Eir. People sign up to Eir and become its customers but the real litmus test is when something goes wrong with network, their billing or something else and they phone Eir's call centre. Politicians get in trouble if we drop the ball and miss a constituency issue. Eir is dealing with that multiplied several times over. To have ComReg on its back, to be referenced on "Prime Time" and to be here today before an Oireachtas committee, all in the space of one week, is hugely embarrassing for Eir. This is not personal. This is about a company - corporate Eir - in front of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communications Networks effectively being hauled over hot coals for letting down its customer base in Ireland. It is embarrassing. I have only been in the Dáil since February. This is a first for me. I have never seen this. We have dealt with trade unions and airlines as we try to get planes back in the sky and discuss transport networks but here we see a company that has let down its customer base. Whether someone is in politics and lets down his or her constituents or in telecommunications and lets down customers, it is an unforgivable error that needs to be addressed.

In the past 12 months, I had to call Eir out twice on Twitter to get it to respond to me on an essential issue for a constituent. This is also unforgivable. I think it took a few days before I realised that I was not talking to Eir but a chatbot on Twitter. It was not a real person. The same names featured twice so Eir is either paying two people to run its Twitter account, which I doubt, or it is using chatbots. Like the Chairman, on some days, I probably waited 30, 40 or 50 minutes. Recently, I was on a call to Eir on my way to the Dáil, which sometimes sits in the national convention centre. When Eir eventually answered after about 50 minutes, I was going down the hill into the underground car park, and all members of the committee can relate to this, when the line cut out after Eir's representative answered because I had gone into an underground car park. I nearly tore out what little hair is left on my head because it was utterly frustrating. Try dealing with that several times a week. It is infuriating.

I also find it incredible that on 26 March, the then Taoiseach declared not just the workers in Eir but all workers in telecommunications to be essential workers who had certain privileges in terms of showing up in the workplace, being able to work and not having their work discontinued. I find it incredible that this was the same month that Eir lost just under one fifth of its call centre workers and it took it almost until the last few weeks of this year to start to replenish them. I get emails on Monday morning, and I am sure other Deputies and Senators here can testify to this, from people asking whether there are any jobs and telling me that their husbands or wives have lost their jobs. I find it incredible that Eir lost 80 employees who have been deemed essential workers and did well-paid work. The salary may be questionable but that is for these workers and Eir to work out in contract terms. To have lost 80 workers and to have waited months to replace them, I find incredible.

I would like to hear more about Eir's customer care service. I know Ms Lennon referred to Eir's call centres in Ireland and we know where they are located. Does a call centre still operate outside Ireland?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** No.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Does Eir use chatbots because I was certainly duped? Customers go on Twitter and believe they are getting a response but are then asked for an account number and to call 0901 before all of this is regurgitated. Is Eir using chatbots?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** No, not that I am aware of. I will come back to the Deputy and confirm that.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I might ask Mr. Storey to comment. Is Eir using chatbots?

**Mr. Edward Storey:** I am not aware of any.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I will check and come back to the Deputy.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** When one looks at the scale of calls that have not been dealt with, Eir clearly needs to recruit more people. That is a simple thing to do. There should not be many barriers to recruitment. Many places are conducting online training at the moment. I had to do so some months ago in a different area so we can all do that.

I understand that in May 2020, Eir sold its mast and tower infrastructure to a US group called Phoenix Tower International for €300 million. I am confused as to why Eir is still applying in its trading name for telecommunications mast antennae. I am even more concerned by the proliferation of mobile phone masts. Before anyone shoots me down, I believe they are good. Masts are important infrastructure. I have two mobile phones in my pocket. I need them because we all depend on mobile phones but a proliferation-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** One is for when I get a call to go home. Proliferation of anything is not good enough. There are five or six masts in my community. Eir is not living up to the planning policy of co-location because each set of antennae it fits to a tower is lucrative. It is worth €6,000 to €10,000 in a calendar year. Eir is putting up a dozen of these and there are another dozen across the same road junction. There is proliferation and there comes a time when there is full 4G reception and 5G reception. No networks are dropping where I am. Networks are dropping in parts of west Clare where Eir has no masts. Will Ms Lennon comment on co-location? Is she following it? Why is Eir still applying for masts when it is no longer its infrastructure?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I do not know the answer to that first question in terms of why we are still applying for masts, unless that is an overhang, but one of the whole points of selling the tower infrastructure to someone like Phoenix Tower International is to facilitate that consolidation. I agree with the Deputy. In a country this small, we should all be on as many of the same sites as possible. That is what has happened in other countries where specialised tower infrastructure companies take on that business and then encourage all the networks to use the same infrastructure. That makes absolute sense.

**Mr. Edward Storey:** I will add to that. We gave the majority of our masts to Phoenix Tower International, which a long time ago was devolved out of Eircom for exactly that purpose of sharing masts. The vast majority of our masts, therefore, would be shared with other operators. There are very few that only have an Eir mast on them. It is possible that some of the newer ones will have an Eir mast working with our partners that, over time, will put more masts on them. It is, however, certainly not our intention to have masts that only have an Eir antenna on them.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I refer to the whole planning policy of co-location. I am in a community with approximately 8,000 people in two square miles. It is a huge population density. There are approximately 25 mobile phone masts and there is no problem with the signal. There is no need for more again. Eir's network can probably take, perhaps, four times the population it is currently drawing out, and yet it puts in more. I want the witnesses to say this in the com-

mittee. I want them to spell out how much Eir's masts are making because it is not network driven.

A person in the west of Clare, two or three miles beyond Ennis, is off the radar. I know many Limerick people enjoy weekends around Kilkee in west Clare. A person cannot phone home when he or she is back there, although perhaps, he or she can in the town of Kilkee. There is, however, something acutely wrong.

Eir is putting 25 or 26 masts into certain communities, totally breaching the co-location policy of An Bord Pleanála and national planning guidelines. In other communities where there is a crying need for mast antennae, Eir has none.

**Mr. Edward Storey:** Our masts and antennae would be a cost to us. We do not generate revenue. We would not generate revenue numbers.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** All the mobile capital we spend is to do with improving coverage. We are not making any money. It is a cost. It is not a revenue source for us, so the €150 million we are spending on upgrading the mobile network is to get 4G to 99% of the geography in Ireland and to get 5G out to as many towns and cities as we can.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** That is good. I want to be very clear on that. I believe, however, Ms Lennon needs to look in-house at this whole issue of co-location-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I will have a look at the co-location issue, but just to be clear, we are not making money on them.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Eir is putting them in in some communities but the communities that really need them do not have any. There is something wrong with that. I know because I have delved into this quite a lot over the years. It is lucrative, and this is the bottom line. It is lucrative because space can be sold. For example, making a 12 m tower into a 24 m one, which is the application currently in my community, and it is a controversial one, and doubling the height of a tower suddenly makes it possible to sell off perhaps ten or 12 antennae spaces on it, each carrying a fee of perhaps €6,000 to €10,000. It makes huge money for the company in a year, but parts of County Clare have no mobile phone signal and it is like falling off the edge of the Earth. Eir is not investing there. As a telecommunications company, the largest in Ireland, in fact, it has an obligation.

**Chairman:** We will come back to Ms Lennon, specifically, on Deputy Crowe's question. Senator Buttimer has seven minutes.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I welcome Ms Lennon and Mr Storey to the meeting. I thank them for their presentations and for taking the questions. Any of the comments I make are not personal to the witnesses.

It is fair to say that of all the utility companies, Eir is the one that exercises people a lot. I believe it needs to address huge areas arising from today's meeting. In light of Deputy Lowry and the Chairman's comments regarding the relationship with National Broadband Ireland, I earnestly ask that this relationship be addressed urgently in the context of the customer and the person who requires a service as a private citizen and as a commercial entity. I urge the witnesses to readdress that relationship. This must be about people.

**Chairman:** In that context, we will write to both Eir and National Broadband Ireland in

order that those discussions will take place, and Eir will communicate to us that those discussions have taken place.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I say that in the context of Eir raising €298 million in revenue and earnings of €142 million. In my humble opinion as a customer of Eir, customer service and customer care are absolutely diabolical. I say that as a customer. A person dials a number and is asked to please punch in his or her number so Eir can remember for further queries. It does not happen in my case. That person then waits an inordinate amount of time. I have spoken to councillors, one of whom, Mr. Jim Gildea, told me he waited an hour and ten minutes. In my case, when I do get to speak to a customer agent, they are among the most professional and dedicated people I ever meet, because they must be lambasted by people every day.

**Chairman:** They are actually very good when one gets through.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** They are very good, but the customer service wait time is inordinate. In light of what Deputy Lowry said, Eir needs to leave here today, not in a combative mood with us, but to restore its credibility, its customer care and service, and its image, because customer care and image is about service provision: Eir TV not working, calls dropping, and services not being strengthened.

I believe Ms Lennon needs to clarify again and apologise to the people of County Sligo regarding her comments this morning and last night. I do not believe Sligo is the problem, it is the structure within Eir. I am told that Abtran is in Sligo and it is working. I am told other businesses have moved to Sligo with not dissimilar issues to those Ms Lennon raised and addressed this morning in her opening statement. I make the point to her, and I have spoken to the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, on this, that there are several call centres in Sligo and Carrick-on-Shannon supported by the IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland and they have no difficulties. I ask Ms Lennon to reflect upon her comments regarding Sligo, because from talking to people there, I know they are incensed by the remarks. I am from Cork, so I am not in Sligo at all. Ms Lennon might come back to me. I have one other question.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** To be clear, I was not in any way insulting or attempting to insult Sligo. This was our issue. We increased staff in Limerick and Cork, but they were established contact centres. We went from scratch in Sligo and we underestimated how hard it was. Abtran certainly is there but many of the people who applied to work for us did not come from a contact centre.

**Chairman:** Ms Lennon was talking about setting up a new-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Yes, we had great support from the IDA Ireland or whatever. They were all very supportive. I am saying it was our challenge.

**Chairman:** Eir had existing centres in Limerick and-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We had exiting centres in Limerick and Cork so we were-----

**Chairman:** Ms Lennon needs to clarify that point.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We were able to expand then easily, but we did everything from scratch and built the whole building.

**Chairman:** No disrespect was meant to people in Sligo.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** No, absolutely not at all. We got great support from the locals and the IDA up there, but we underestimated how hard it was going to be to start from scratch.

**Chairman:** The issue is with Eir, not with the people of Sligo.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Absolutely. We felt it in Sligo where we did not feel it elsewhere because it was greenfield. We were building on existing centres in Cork and Limerick.

**Chairman:** I think people may have interpreted in a different way what Ms Lennon said last night. We welcome that she clarified it.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** That was not the way it was meant. I have huge sympathy for our staff in Sligo in particular, to be fair, because as I said, the contact centre only opened last October and they found themselves in this situation very shortly after. The majority who have stuck at it have been great to do so.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I thank Ms Lennon and I welcome that. She might give us an update on the roll-out of 5G, please. In terms of the broadband gaps that Deputy Lowry mentioned, I live in urban Cork and there are huge deficiencies in terms of broadband connectivity in places like Lehenaghmore, Monkstown and Ballinora. That is why it is important we see a re-evaluation of the relationship with National Broadband Ireland. In the context of the overarching picture, will Ms Lennon give me a vision of where she sees telecommunications going in the future?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I will answer the Senator's question on 5G first in terms of where we are. We have just over 45% population coverage and 111 towns with the largest 5G network in the country. That is part of our plan. We will continue to push out 5G. Our big roll-out is as much about upgrading all the 4G equipment because that will get to 99% geographical coverage, which everyone should benefit from. Potentially it is a source to work from home with until national broadband arrives everywhere.

On the future of telecommunications, there has been a lot of investment in infrastructure in Ireland over the past five years, driven largely by ourselves. When we finish our national build and NBI has done its rural build, Ireland will be in the top five in Europe in access to fibre. It is future-proofed because it is fibre directly into homes. There are services that none of us have thought of today that we will be able to take advantage of with direct fibre cable.

**Chairman:** Ms Lennon said that setting up the call centre in Sligo was a mistake.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** No, I did not; I said it was a bigger challenge than we thought. We are committed to Sligo; there is no issue about Sligo.

**Chairman:** So Ms Lennon does not regard it as a mistake.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** No. I want to be really clear. We made a strategic decision to bring care back in-house - it was outsourced before I ever joined Eir, never mind when I became CEO - because we thought it was a better way to deliver a better service for our customers, where the staff work directly for us and we can get them to buy into what we wanted to do for our customers. We made that decision at the same time we made the decision to move out of Dublin. Our contact centre in Dublin, which was not managed by us but by an outsourced vendor, had nearly 100% staff turnover every year because there is a lot of choice in Dublin for jobs and people were passing through. We thought we would never get the quality of agent with the experience

they need to deal with all the various issues that we get if they are always changing.

**Chairman:** So Eir is committed to Sligo?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We said we would get out of Dublin. We had venues in Cork and Limerick already so we said we would expand them and put more resources in there, but we also wanted to go somewhere else. We picked Sligo because we thought it would give us access to a whole new set of resources from Sligo and neighbouring counties, where people might come in and travel. We got great support from the local council and from IDA Ireland and we picked Sligo. We also have an Eir exchange building there and some of our field guys work there. We built a contact centre from scratch in Sligo. We put all the infrastructure in place, we hired the head of the contact centre and hired all the staff. We in Eir - me and the team - underestimated the challenge and we also underestimated the impact of our Dublin centre, which was outsourced, getting smaller as people in Dublin went off to get new jobs, and the speed at which we could ramp up in Sligo, so at one stage they were out of sync. We were losing people in Dublin and we were not hiring them quickly enough in Sligo.

**Chairman:** Is the company fully committed to Sligo in the long term?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We are fully committed to Sligo.

**Chairman:** If Eir has such a problem with the delivery of service at the moment, why has it not outsourced some of it on a short-term basis to be able to deal with customers queries and complaints now?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** That was one of the options we looked at, but we also looked at whether we could leverage our retail channels and do more online. That is the route we went. We also wanted to hire again, and get our headcount back up. The route we went was hire ourselves and use our other channels such as retail and online to try to manage the volumes.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I thank Ms Lennon for her clarification on Sligo. It is important because people are incensed about it.

I have had contacts from councillors from Laois, Cork, Leitrim, Dublin, Tipperary and Kerry just about Eir and customer relationships. I appeal to Ms Lennon: the staff when one gets through are phenomenal people, they deserve our thanks, but we, as citizens and customers, should not have to wait an hour and ten minutes or have to push 44 buttons and hear all the music for an hour and ten minutes, to get a reply. I ask her to please respect her staff and her customers.

I concur completely with Deputy O'Rourke. There needs to be recompense to the customer who has lost service or been discommoded through poor coverage repeatedly. Eir is not the only company with customer care and service provision issues but I am stunned by Ms Lennon's remark about ComReg that she was surprised, given that they meet every two weeks. Surely something must have been flagged in advance. I thank Ms Carolan for being here and for her testimony.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** I thank Ms Lennon and Mr. Storey for being here. I also have a litany of issues and faults across County Wicklow from Blessington to Arklow to Wicklow town. There is a sense of frustration, anger, and isolation in many cases. Other members have referred to it. We are not going to fix all those issues today but in dealing with other utility companies, they often have a public representatives direct support line or email. I find Irish Water

very good in particular. Could Eir establish something like that while we are dealing with and getting through the backlog of complaints?

It is important to acknowledge Eir's front-line staff, similar to front-line staff in many sectors, who have been working hard through Covid in difficult circumstances, in particular, the call centre staff, the technical support and engineers. It must be very demoralising for them to hear the company that they are working hard for and doing their best being dragged over the coals through the media. I acknowledge that the staff that I have dealt with have been working very, very hard. When we know staff are working hard, we need to examine management, infrastructure and engineering. I have a number of direct questions.

Are the 340,000 fibre to the home connections fibre to the internal router in the house or is there any element of old copper in the system?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** No, it is fibre all the way.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** That is perfect. There are 1 million customers on the network at the moment. It is a legacy network. Where are the weak points on the network that Ms Lennon would say need investment? Is it the final 100 m to the home? Is it the hubs? Where is it?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We have fibre to the cabinet built to 1.6 million homes. There are 340,000 rural connections. We are overbuilding the fibre to the cabinet network to bring fibre to the home, to do exactly what we did to urban. An element to those fibre to the cabinet customer are quite far from the exchange. It goes from the exchange to the cabinet, which is fibre and then the copper brings it into the house. People will experience difficulties and variations in quality because of the length of that copper line. Our plan, which we have started, is to overbuild. We will certainly do 1.4 million homes of the 1.6 million and bring that fibre connection straight in. We are at 670,000. When one takes the 340,000 away, we have done about 330,000 of those and are doing approximately 60,000 per quarter at the moment.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** It is the final bit of the link, that old copper legacy, where there is an issue.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Yes.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** And Eir is working to address that and rolling out fibre.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Yes, if one looks at the data, the fault rate on copper is twice that of fibre. Where there is a whole fibre network and one has got rid of the copper, it affects the level of faults reported. Copper loves lightning, it is not great with water, and so on, whereas fibre is much more resilient and, therefore, there is a much more resilient network with an all-fibre network.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** Ms Lennon says Eir has 1,000 field engineers who have dealt with 200,000 repairs. How many of them are directly employed in front-line faulting to the house?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** The vast majority. I can come back with a specific number but our field engineers are set up with a front-line manager. They have very small management teams there. The vast majority of engineers are out there and do not just do repair, they also do some build and so on, but the vast majority are on the road in their vans every day, fixing things and new build.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** It is a combination of directly faulting, new works, insulations, and testing and 1,000 field engineers are across that.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** All across the country.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** Does Ms Lennon think that is enough to deal with the network and the necessary upgrades?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Yes, absolutely. Our targets are set every year by ComReg for faults and so on. We have been well under them this year, despite some storms and whatever. That feels about right and we have the resources we need for our build.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** Are most of them contract staff?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** No, our field engineers are all employed directly by Eir. Some of them are there since the time of Post and Telegraphs.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** That is very helpful when the company has field engineers that they know the legacy issues.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** They know the networks better than anybody.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** That is really important. As for fault reporting, from the fault report to the repair report going back in, a number of steps have to be taken. Is Eir experiencing any difficulty when a fault is notified to the service centre or call centre, with the diagnosis of that fault or with how it is recorded and then sent communicated to those in the field? Is Eir having any difficulty between the fault report and repair?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** No. Normally, if one presses the option on the IVR for a fault, one gets through to the tech support team and it will do some kind of triage to make sure the problem is not the person's modem before we send out a field engineer. Generally - I cannot say every single time because sometimes people miss something - that works very well. It then goes to the UG and the field guy gets it and he goes out to fix it. The problem we were having was that elderly customers in particular could not get through to raise their faults. They are not comfortable with the online forms. Some people are grand going online but some people are not. The elderly customers were not necessarily comfortable with online forms. The delay, therefore, was in getting the fault reported, not in our receiving it and getting it to the field guy to fix.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** Another query has come to me. Is there any difficulty in assigning Eircode postcodes to addresses? Is an Eircode postcode needed for a connection?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** It is.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** Is there any difficulty in the assigning of Eircode postcodes and the rate at which they are assigned?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** In the past, when the network was designed all those years ago, we did not have Eircode postcodes. That brought a challenge, particularly with rural addresses, because we would go to the wrong address. Once Eircode postcodes came out, we adopted them as a way to be very specific about the houses we go to. They get updated only every quarter, however, so sometimes a customer gets frustrated because we use the Eircode postcode to match up the address on our network. If it is not registered, we do not have the match-up and

the customer says he or she wants to get connected. We are working with the people who do the Eircode postcodes to see if we can get the updates done a little more regularly, not-----

**Chairman:** Eir will not use the address alone.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** That is okay in more populated areas, but we have found that it causes a lot of problems in rural Ireland because the addresses are similar and we end up going to the wrong place.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** We all experience that in canvassing rural areas, I think. If the Eircode postcodes were to be assigned monthly, does Ms Lennon think that would assist?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Yes, absolutely. The fact that the updates are carried out every quarter means there is a gap and it does not make sense to people. They are in their houses asking, “Where is my Eircode?”

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** I thank Ms Lennon for answering those questions.

**Chairman:** Well done, Deputy Matthews.

**Mr. Edward Storey:** I wish to give just one clarification. We have a dedicated email address for Members of the Oireachtas to which they can send any issues they have. We will follow up to make sure Members have the address.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** Irish Water has a dedicated phone line as well. If Eir could supplement the email address with a phone line, I think we would all-----

**Chairman:** I think both an email address and a phone contact-----

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** Yes, it would be very helpful.

**Chairman:** The witnesses might email the committee on that matter.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I thank Mr. Storey for that. A phone line would stop us having to write to Ms Lennon as often as we do. I am not sure that is an efficient use of our time, or indeed hers, so that would be great, and I thank Deputy Matthews for bringing it up.

Ms Lennon mentioned that Eir is a private company, and it is, but in the eyes of the people, rightly or wrongly, it is still our flag carrier for telecommunications - telephone, broadband and so on. It is a bit like Aer Lingus. People will always look at Eir and Aer Lingus and say, “Those are our companies.” That is a responsibility and it adds to Eir’s job but the idea is out there among people, so there are extra demands. That is just a fact.

We have spoken a lot about the reputational damage but it cannot be overstated. The Ceann Comhairle broke protocol a couple of weeks ago to refer to Eir from the Chair. That has never happened before. Our Ceann Comhairle is fantastic. I think people on all sides of the House would agree he is straight down the middle, so these are issues. I have been a Teachta Dála only since February but I have been working in politics for nine years. There has always been a reputational issue with Eir. It has exploded this year but it always was the sick child, so to speak, across not just telecommunications but any kind of company we deal with regularly.

I will move on to the staff who were lost earlier this year because it is quite head-scratching. To lose a large percentage of one’s staff in a place such as Dublin, where even during the pandemic there may have been the odd chance of picking up another job, is different from losing

staff in places such as Sligo or other large regional towns, where jobs are not as plentiful, even in good times. Did Eir do any research as to why those 80 people left? Were there any exit interviews?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We did some exit interviews. For many of the staff, their home circumstances were not conducive to working from home, where they found-----

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Did they have broadband?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Some of them did not, or they had some spawner connectivity but it was not good enough, so some of them had connectivity issues. For some of them, it was just their circumstances. They were sharing and there was no free space to do their work. Some of them just found it really difficult. It just was not what they expected life working for Eir in a contact centre to be like.

**Chairman:** Were they going to other jobs?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** No, many of them were not going to other jobs.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Did Eir have to let anyone go for not having the infrastructure in place in their homes?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Absolutely not, but there were some reports of people hanging up on customers. If that turns out to be genuine, that is, the call is not dropped because the person does not have good connectivity, that goes through our disciplinary process, but such cases represent a tiny proportion of job losses. I think people found it very challenging and, of course, as our wait times got worse people were cross when they got through to the agents, so I think some of them just said, "No, this is just not for me." We were incredibly disappointed. Obviously, we put people through the training and so on. At the start, when people started working from home, April was a good month connectivity-wise and productivity-wise. I think there was a novelty and a relief but then it started to settle in. Nobody thought we would still be working from home in November. That was an unexpected challenge, and I think people just found it very difficult.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I worked in a contact centre for a phone company when I was in college just to get by. It is a very stressful job. It was a part-time job for me and I found it stressful. We have mentioned the wages, which are just above minimum wage, but I commend Eir on insourcing the contact centre. It is a big job. I worked at a contact centre that outsourced staff. To improve upon the wages, and given the profitability of Eir, looking at the wage structure of the contact centre staff, retention must be considered. I welcome the fact that, as Ms Lennon mentioned, there is maternity and paternity leave and sick pay. That is not usual in contact centres.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** It is very unusual.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** It is, so I commend Eir on that as something that is unusual. We tend to undervalue contact service workers in this country. I think a number of Deputies have spoken to the service they get when they reach the end of the phone being good. If Eir is going to leave a charge on this in terms of insourcing and valuing them, and the company has done work towards that, it should continue to lead and look particularly at wages and supports in dealing with workers who are stressed dealing with an awful lot of negativity. The witnesses may wish to speak about that.

What is the bonus structure Ms Lennon mentioned for the staff? Is it based on call quality or unsociable hours?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** It is a combination. It is based on the number of calls, a call quality element and an attendance element, so it is based on a number of things. One of the things Mr. Storey pointed out to me just today is that 50% of our new hires are referred by a friend already working in Eir, so we do get people happy to recommend their friends to work for us. As I said, though, it is a tough job, and I do value the staff strongly.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Eir monitors and analyses the calls it receives. Notwithstanding the number of calls it gets from us, which are clogging up the system even further, what percentage of calls are from repeat callers? Is it a problem percentage?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** It is the same problem.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** How much of that is clogging up the system, and what is Eir doing to resolve that at the point of fixing the problem?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** There definitely is a percentage of repeat calls.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Is it a problem percentage?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** It is big enough that we are paying attention to it and trying to reduce it. It is bigger than we would like it to be and bigger than we think it should be. We have tried a number of things because, again, such calls clog up the system. We have an initiative with our contact centres to the effect that we try to get it right and get it done on the first call and the customer leaves happy with his or her problem solved or the thing we have agreed to do done so we do not give them reason for complaint. We have also done other things. For example, if the same person has called us, say, twice, before he or she can get to call us again, we try outbound-calling him or her to say: "We know you have been on to us. There is obviously something wrong or something that did not get fixed the last time. What is going on?" I believed that was a great idea. What we found was that people do not always take outbound calls, for example, and then we get a call back again. We are trying to minimise the number of inbound calls in the first place. The reality, however, is that if we do what we say we are going to do when we receive calls from customers, and if they get through to us promptly, there should be no reason for them to ring back. Members will have seen the number of ComReg complaints last night. It is now down to under 100. It means the majority of problems were not that difficult to fix. Some are very hard to fix in that planning permission or whatever may be required. Such cases are in the minority. Most problems are straightforward enough to fix. It may involve closing accounts, as Deputy Dooley mentioned. It is a matter of doing what we say we are going to do, such as changing someone's promotion. Where it is not being done, maybe it is because people are under great pressure, or another reason, and this gives customers a reason to all us back. We are all over the question of how to prevent the calls coming in by doing what we say we are going to do. However, we absolutely must answer the phones, which is really important.

I got emails and notes from my front-line staff last night.

**Chairman:** What does Ms Lennon want to say to her front-line staff today?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** They are doing an amazing job. Care in Eir is my responsibility. It is my fault that there is an issue; it is not the staff's fault. They are doing their absolute best in really tough circumstances. The field staff have been amazing. They wrote to me at the start and

said keeping the networks up and not running out of capacity were a matter of national pride for them. They have done that. It is not just question of our network in that the capacity increases on all the Irish networks have generally stood up well. One can see the investment over the past five years paying off. The front-line guys, the care guys, hate the negative aspect. It is justified and I am not pushing back against it. Many of those concerned wrote to me last night and this morning to thank me for standing up for them in this regard, but we have to fix their problems. It is not their problem; it is my problem and I have to fix it.

We have an initiative on wellness. We are very conscious that people are at home on their own and that mental health issues may arise. We did something last week for International Men's Day with the Happy Pear guys. We are constantly sending out tips. We have an employee assistance programme that covers everything from medical supports to financial supports, in addition to counselling, if needed. We are constantly reminding people that the supports are available. We are setting up the webinars and we got as much flu vaccine as we could get. We did all these kinds of things so we are very conscious of looking after our staff. It is harder to do so at this time because we do not see them physically every day.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I welcome what Ms Lennon said earlier. There was always an Oireachtas email but it is a matter of a contact number. There is always an element of failure when going through a Deputy to get matters such as these sorted quickly. What are the variations in response times associated with the various means by which people can make contact with the company and deal with issues? What will work better for people? An earlier speaker mentioned contacting Eir via Twitter, for example. What works? I accept there are major difficulties.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** If a person is happy to deal with us online with a query about a refund or to report a fault or the seizing of the line, the matter will be dealt with online. It is a good approach if one does not feel the need to talk to us. The customer gets an email saying we are on to the issue and, therefore, there is no need to worry it has fallen between the cracks or whatever.

We have a complaint number. It is on our website. That line's waiting time has been under five minutes consistently. If a person is so annoyed with us that he or she wants to complain, we do not want him or her hanging up.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I have encountered people who were complaining they could not make the complaints and went to ComReg.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We have a complaints number. We absolutely make sure calls are answered very quickly because, if someone is really cross with us when they ring the complaints number, we want to make sure their problem is at least listened to and sorted out. That is another way to do it. Obviously, people can complain to ComReg or to me but I suggest they use the complaints number online if they are comfortable using it. Otherwise, our care line can be used. The numbers are decreasing, albeit slowly.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I accept that. Reputational damage has been referred to. I believe the witnesses need to consider a payback to customers. It is not for us to make a determination on that, however.

Eir is 30 staff short of the number it would like. I imagine it might need to review that. People have referred to the consideration of wage structures and so on but these are issues for

Eir itself. Eir believes 30 will bring it up to speed in being able to deliver what it needs to deliver. As regards training, how long will that take?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We should have all the people we need before the end of December. At the moment, that is what we believe, but if we need more, we will hire more.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** It will be consistently reviewed.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Yes. We have decided we will bring people in constantly and train them because we always lose a number of people in the contact centre. The aim is to have people to slot in so a gap will not emerge again. Now we can proceed according to the health and safety guidelines, in groups of five. We can keep that going; that is our plan. We will hire as many as we need. We also want to get back to being able to handle 40 calls per day, if possible. We are handling 30 now. We would like people to be able to take more calls. We are working on that. We want to continue to work on not giving customers a reason to call us and on giving them another way to make contact.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I disagree with some points that have been made. A skill set is needed to deal with calls. The employee needs to be able to work through the information and training given. It is the second tier, however, that will require technical information.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Our technical support team.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Has Eir sufficient capacity at technical support level? The delegation has talked about the building of the IFN. Is there capacity in this regard?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** The technical support team is pretty stable. Generally, there is a low turnover. The staff work their way up through the ranks and become very technical, or whatever. Generally there is a low turnover of staff on the team. Recently we lost a couple of staff because the HSE set up a contact tracing centre in Limerick. The technical support element is based there. We have lost a few to that. It is unusual for us to lose technical support staff but six started this week so we are keeping the number up. The technical staff do the triage of the issues.

On the field side, we have been running apprenticeship programmes for the past several years. We have been refreshing the field staff as they have retired, and we are well on top of our fault service level agreements. Considering that we have worked through the pandemic, we are where we thought we would be with our IFN build and our mobile build.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I accept that. I do not want to repeat a number of points that have been made. Obviously, Eir has been dealing with the time it takes people to make contact. Issues have also arisen in that people who have passed away have been sent invoices. I imagine Eir will need to review procedures in that regard.

People can sometimes understand delays given the added logistics and so on but when they are given false information, it is a problem. In that regard also, Eir needs to review a whole pile of procedures.

I was not going to raise my next point but I will do so now. It concerns County Louth specifically. A man was experiencing difficulties with fibre-to-home broadband. He signed a contract in December. The KN group, the installation subcontractor, reviewed the property and said a telephone pole would be needed. The customer agreed. The subcontractor then said it

was on the way but when he checked with Louth County Council, he discovered no application had been made. He then contacted Eir, which said it was the responsibility of KN. On contacting Eir, we were given information to the effect that the company is working on the issue. That is the sort of issue arising. We need clarity on this.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Because of the two.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Exactly.

Elderly people, in particular, are encountering difficulties, specifically with telephone line questions that are not being dealt with. They are not people who will make contact via the Internet. I have had one or two of these cases but I will give them to the witnesses afterwards.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** If they are given to us, we will follow up on them.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Somebody raised with me the cost of rental of a landline. In many cases, it affects old people, possibly in areas where the mobile coverage is not great. Rental can sometimes be more expensive than the calls made. People are cancelling the lines. Is that a matter that could be investigated?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Our line rental price is set by the regulator. The other operators then decide what they are going to charge for it. The wholesale price is regulated.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** With regard to Eir's mobile network, people in areas without a good mobile coverage who use the network for broadband sometimes use a TP-Link router and attach an antenna that provides extra capacity. Has Eir had many issues in relation to that? I assume the company has noted a pick-up in the number of people doing that? I am aware that ComReg has difficulties with the use of some of these antennae. That is why I ask.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We have a mobile broadband product, which has seen a big increase in uptake through this. We are looking at an antenna-based wireless product that would be a bit more structured than that. We are in the middle of looking at that and will probably launch that-----

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** This is a make-do until we have a greater proliferation of broadband.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** They have been using that but we are looking at a more solid product for a proper launch. We should have that out in the next couple of months.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I thank Ms Lennon.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I thank the Chairman for allowing me to contribute. I am not a regular member of the committee and I am here as a guest today. I thank the representatives from Eir for attending. Unlike State agencies, Eir is not bound to appear before Oireachtas committees. We appreciate this opportunity. I also thank Deputy James O'Connor for allowing me to use his slot to contribute.

It gives me no pleasure to say this but Ms Lennon's comments this morning reflect more on her and her management team than on the staff in Sligo. Does Ms Lennon accept that?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I do not know which specific comments the Deputy is referring to.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I will read directly from Twitter this morning, and Ms Lennon

can correct me if I am wrong. It refers to it being a “mistake” to go to Sligo.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** That is not what I said, and I clarified that during my presentation.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** In that case, Ms Lennon is happy Eir went to Sligo.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Of course. What I said was that we had underestimated-----

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Did Ms Lennon also say that Sligo did not have experience of customer care centres before Eir set up there?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Yes, they did not have-----

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** How many thousands of people does Ms Lennon think worked at MBNA?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** To be clear, when we were recruiting in Sligo, the people who applied for jobs - the great people who are working for Eir today - came mostly from retail and hospitality. We did not get-----

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Is that not a matter for Eir and its recruitment strategy?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I feel that this whole conversation about Sligo is got completely out of hand. We are delighted to have set up in-----

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** We have the opportunity to correct it now. That is why I am putting pertinent questions. Is it correct that Morgan McKinley handled the recruitment?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Yes, it did.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** It did that from Cork. Is that right?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** It did a good job of it.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** It did a great job. It recruited from Cork. With hindsight, would it have been better to use a company in Galway or Sligo, if there were any, to handle the recruitment?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I do not think there were any issues with Morgan McKinley. What I said earlier was-----

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** It did a great job too.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** What I said earlier, and I stand over it, is that we underestimated how hard it was to set up a greenfield contact centre. We did that, not the staff on the ground or Morgan McKinley.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Why would Ms Lennon say that Sligo did not have the experience of customer care centres before Eir?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We did not get as many applications from ex-customer service staff as we got in Limerick or Cork.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Does Ms Lennon accept that it was an incorrect statement?

25 NOVEMBER 2020

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Okay. If the Deputy wants me to say it was incorrect, that is fine. I was not trying to have a go at Sligo.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Ms Lennon either believes it or that is what she is saying.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I am telling the Deputy that the vast majority of the people we hired in Sligo did not come from contact centres. They came from retail or hospitality.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Is it correct that Ms Lennon said that Sligo did not have experience of customer care centres before Eir set up there?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** That was probably the wrong way to have put it.

**Chairman:** Would Ms Lennon like to retract that?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** What I would like to say is-----

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Would Ms Lennon like to retract that?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Yes, I am happy to retract that.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** That is good. For the record, MBNA employed thousands and had downscaled substantially when it became Bank of America, and Avantcard after the fact. They would have been available. Toucan Telecommunications had also been in Sligo for a number of years, so its former staff would have been available. Abtran, which did its direct recruitment locally and did not go all the way to Cork to seek staff in the Sligo or north-west area, employed 350 people and did not seem to have a problem. Does Ms Lennon accept that the problem here is not a CEO blaming the staff but, rather, the management team not planning appropriately for a set-up?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** First of all, the CEO never blames her staff, never has and never will. As I said last night, as I have said here, and as I will say again-----

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Ms Lennon can blame social media.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** -----I am responsible, as the CEO, for the poor level of service that is being offered to our customers. The buck stops with me. We have great staff in Sligo, Limerick and Cork. I said and I meant - if I said it incorrectly, I apologise - that we made mistakes and underestimated how difficult it would be to get a contact centre off the ground in Sligo. They are my mistakes and my management team's mistakes. They are nothing to do with the staff in Sligo, the people in Sligo or any support we got in Sligo.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I understand that now, and I thank Ms Lennon for clarifying it. She will understand, however, that social media is alive as we speak with people who are very frustrated. If there is an alternative in Sligo, Eir will not be on the list of companies from which we will get our sports channels, mobile networks or landlines. I say this as a loyal customer whose family worked for Eir for a period of time.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Lennon for giving that clarification.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** It is important that Ms Lennon clarifies that and I suggest that she contact her staff in Sligo, whether it is the guys who go up poles or those in the call centre, to say she is committed to them. What is Eir's long-term commitment to the centre in Sligo?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We are absolutely committed to Sligo.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** It is good to have that statement as well.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** We are recruiting and training in Sligo. Our field guys who sort out our repairs are based in Sligo. There is no issue with that.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** What is the rate of attrition for the Sligo staff?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I do not have the figures for Sligo versus Cork. It is higher in Sligo but I do not have the exact percentage. I think it is higher in Sligo because, to be fair, it was a new contact centre. It literally opened in October of last year. Our Cork and Limerick centres have been there for a long time, with established team leaders, structures and processes. I can send on the exact percentages but it is higher in Sligo. That may have been to do with people who, to be fair to them, were new to Eir, contact centres and the role and found themselves in a very difficult situation from March.

**Chairman:** That was not their problem; it was Eir's problem.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Absolutely.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** How much lower, as a percentage, are the salaries paid to Sligo-based contact centre staff compared with those in Dublin?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I cannot answer that because the staff were hired by an outsourced partner. They were not Eir employees. We had a contract with HCL Technologies to get X number of calls answered.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I am sure this analysis can be done by actuaries or other analysts within the company. With regard to a whole-time equivalent, how much cheaper is it to have a contact centre in Sligo than it was for that contract?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** It is actually not cheaper at all to have a contact centre in-house versus outsourced. The vast majority of telcos outsource their contact centres because it is more cost effective. We moved out of Dublin because of staff retention. HCL Technologies was our contractor. We had staff turnover of nearly 100% in Dublin. We moved out of Dublin to Sligo and expanded our centres in Limerick and Cork because we wanted to hold on to our staff for longer. We thought it would be better for them, for us and for our customers.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Are pay rates in Limerick and Cork-----

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** They are exactly the same. They are collectively bargained by our unions. We have just agreed a three-year pay increase across the board. They are treated exactly the same.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I thank Ms Lennon for her candid answers. I ask that she contact her staff in Sligo to address her commitment to them given the discourse here this morning and last night. I humbly suggest that when recruiting in Sligo perhaps a Cork-based recruitment firm is not the best way to proceed.

**Chairman:** There is no element of disrespect for the Cork firm which did the recruiting.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** It is a very reputable firm.

25 NOVEMBER 2020

**Chairman:** The Deputy was asking a general question.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Of course, it is a reputable firm but I bet it is better at recruiting in Cork than in Sligo.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I understand the point about using a local supplier. I get that but I want to be clear that Morgan McKinley did a good job for us. This is not Morgan McKinley's issue.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** It is regional.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank the Chairman for allowing me to contribute. I also thank the witnesses for appearing before the committee. I am sure that every Oireachtas Member will want to be here. We expect there will be seismic change in customer care and customer service from now on.

The impact this has on the productivity of business customers who are waiting weeks and months to have their queries and issues dealt with is completely unacceptable. That is apart from the health, safety and well-being of other customers because they are dependent on the connectivity. I welcome that we will have access to a telephone line. It is ludicrous that Oireachtas Members do not even have a line to get through on. I want to ask how many customer care staff Eir had in December last year and how many it has now to deal with the queries. When is it going to get the outstanding queries dealt with?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** In December last year, we had 500 staff in customer care and we are about 40 short of that now, with recruitment in the pipeline. Our plan is to get back to where we were. If we need to, we will add additional staff.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** It is 40 short and it has 150,000 new customers, as well as all of the problems with Covid. That speaks for itself. How are those staff supposed to provide the service?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Those 150,000 customers are not all Eir customers. We are a wholesaler as well. We did 150,000 connections for Vodafone, Sky and Eir, so they are not all Eir. They do not all need to ring our contact centre but also the other contact centres.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Eir does not have enough staff. I commend the staff who try to sort out the issues but people do not really know the extent of the problem because so many cannot get through. I put it to Ms Lennon that if people want to listen to music for hours and hours, over weeks and months, they will connect to Spotify. They do not want music from Eir, they want a service. They want a service that can give them an essential piece of telecommunications infrastructure. I ask Ms Lennon to go away from here today and to put that in place. I ask that we would come back immediately after Christmas to see if we have the improvements we have been promised here today.

**Chairman:** How many minutes on average is it taking to answer a query at the moment? What is Eir's target and when will it be reached?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** On average, in October, it was under ten minutes. Monday is our busy day.

**Chairman:** What does Ms Lennon expect it to be in November?

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**Ms Carolan Lennon:** In November, we want it to be in single digits.

**Chairman:** What is the target?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** Our target is seven or eight.

**Chairman:** When will that be?

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** It should be by the end of this month and we are nearly there. By December, we want to be under five, and that is our plan.

**Chairman:** Ms Lennon heard everything here today.

**Ms Carolan Lennon:** I did.

**Chairman:** We want Eir to reflect on recompensing customers, to reflect on the gap areas and to reflect generally on getting the times down and effectively dealing with customers and their complaints in time.

I thank the witnesses for attending. Eir is a private company and they did not have to come. We welcome the robust engagement. I thank Ms Lennon and Mr. Storey for their contributions and for engaging with the committee. The next meeting of the joint committee will be a private virtual meeting at 4 p.m. today. The next public meeting of the committee will be at 11:30 a.m. on Wednesday, 2 December in committee room 4.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.33 p.m. until 11.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 2 December 2020.