

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN ROGHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR AGUS LÍONRAÍ CUMARSÁIDE

### SELECT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS

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*Dé Céadaoin, 4 Samhain 2020*

*Wednesday, 4 November 2020*

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Tháinig an Roghchoiste le chéile ag 11.30 a.m.

The Select Committee met at 11.30 a.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	
Joe Carey,	
Cathal Crowe,	
James O'Connor,	
Darren O'Rourke,	
Ruairí Ó Murchú.	

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

**Estimates for Public Services 2020.****Vote 29 - Environment, Climate and Communications (Revised)**

**Chairman:** The first item for consideration is the Revised Estimates for Public Services 2020 for programme A of Vote 29, relating to the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. The Dáil ordered that the Revised Estimates for Public Services in respect of the following Votes be referred to this select committee, namely, Vote 31 - Transport; and programme A of Vote 29 - Environment, Climate and Communications. As members are aware, the committee previously considered Vote 31 with the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and today's meeting will only consider programme A of Vote 29. I remind members that the committee has no role in actually approving the Estimates. It is an ongoing opportunity for the committee to examine departmental expenditure, to make the process more transparent and to engage in a meaningful way on relevant performance issues.

I welcome the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and his officials to the meeting. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment or criticise or make charges against a person outside of the House or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I now invite the Minister to make his opening statement.

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I thank the committee for this opportunity to present the 2020 Revised Estimate for programme A, relating to communications, of Vote 29 - Environment, Climate and Communications.

Networks are one of the fundamental building blocks of society and the economy. This is one of the main reasons I took responsibility for transport communications and postal services as part of my ministerial portfolio. Providing strong and sustainable networks is key to both long-term economic and social well-being in the current environment and post Covid-19. Our response to the Covid pandemic has shown the importance of networks in allowing society and the economy to continue to function. Our broadband and mobile phone networks facilitated an overnight transition to remote working for many people. The postal and parcels networks have experienced an exponential increase in traffic in response to online ordering. The post office network has facilitated outreach to the isolated and vulnerable and provided a valuable community service.

Programme A covers the communications function. Overall, €157.8 million was allocated to this programme in 2020, consisting of €14.4 million for current expenditure, and €143.4 million for capital. This includes €27.3 million capital carried over from 2019. The focus of the programme is to support economic growth, jobs, competitiveness and social inclusion through a range of policies and regulation designed to facilitate a more digitally connected economy and society. It provides for investment in the national broadband plan, promotion of the use of digital technologies by citizens and businesses and support for digital entrepreneurship.

The biggest item of investment within this programme is the national broadband scheme at €104.6 million, including capital carryover of €27.3 million. The Covid-19 crisis has made definitive the essential importance of high-speed broadband. High-speed broadband has the capability to transform completely how people live and work as well as where they live and work.

It will have a significant impact on the design and provision of future services, from transport to location of housing and the nature of office work. The national broadband plan contract is the largest infrastructural project in rural Ireland since rural electrification, spanning 96% of Ireland's land mass. It will deliver fast, reliable broadband to people living and working in nearly 540,000 premises in the intervention area. It will involve the laying of 140,000 km of fibre cable, utilising over 1.5 million poles and over 15,000 km of underground duct networks. The network will offer a high-speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500 Mbps from the outset. The current deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first two years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high-speed broadband within the next four years.

With the advent of Covid-19, many small and micro-businesses have found themselves with the challenge of having to shut their physical presence and adapt their business model, with many trading online for the first time. As part of the Government's Covid-19 business supports package for small businesses, the terms of the trading online voucher scheme have been amended and its budget significantly increased from €2.3 million to €32.6 million.

The 2020 Estimates include €1.5 million for Eircode. Eircode postcode usage continues to grow and the postcodes are widely used among the public, businesses and the public sector. In March of this year, the daily look-up limit on the free Eircode postcode finder website was increased from 15 to 50 in response to the Covid crisis for members of the public and businesses locating addresses. As a result, and since then, over 15 million look-ups have been made by members of the public and businesses locating addresses, an average increase of 41% on the same period last year.

The 2020 Estimates for the communications programme support growth and innovation in digital entrepreneurship through the Digital Hub Development Agency and the National Digital Research Centre. The Estimates also include €1.7 million operational funding for the National Cyber Security Centre, which plays a key role in securing Government and critical national infrastructure and will continue to be strengthened.

I am more than happy to answer any questions about the 2020 Estimate of expenditure and investment for the services provided by my Department on this programme.

**Chairman:** We now move to questions from members.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** The Minister has detailed the huge operation that is the national broadband scheme and has outlined, no matter how important we thought it was previous to the pandemic, how necessary it is now for businesses and individuals to have access to broadband. What works have been done recently to establish, by dealing with National Broadband Ireland, whether there is any chance of accelerating the process by which we might get proper infrastructure out to areas in rural Ireland? In fairness, some of these areas are not that remote. I am talking about parts of County Louth which are literally a couple of miles outside of Dundalk.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I was very pleased to launch the first of the 300 broadband connection points which are the first phase of the scheme's delivery. The Deputy will be glad to hear that the launch was not as far away as County Louth but was up in the Glenasmole valley, County Dublin, which is as isolated as one finds. There is a local community centre there where the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and I were pleased to introduce these connection points. We are very keen to see an acceleration, wherever possible, of the national broadband scheme but it cannot compromise the delivery of quality or value for money. I think this is possible, primar-

ily because one of the risks or uncertainties in the roll-out of the national broadband plan is the potential uptake. Covid and the acceleration of the digital revolution, with remote working and the use of Zoom and other technologies, give the national broadband company every incentive to try to accelerate its works. Covid did cause delays and create some difficulties. There were difficulties in one of the key contractors coming in from the UK, with the restrictions in place on travel, but that has by and large been caught up with. A lot of the work done to date has been rather detailed survey work, such as assessing which exact poles might be used, whether Eir poles, ESB poles or other systems, to get the fibre out to houses. We will start before the end of this year with fibre passing not just the broadband connection points, which are focused at community centres and other hubs, but also in Carrigaline, as I understand it, and Cavan. First will be the passing of houses and then it is hoped we will see what the level of uptake there is. It is up to the householder to avail of the services. There will be difficulties without doubt. One cannot engage in projects of this scale and complexity without difficulties. We are, as I said, literally covering the entire country and having to map out and plot out the exact route to get this fibre or a fast wireless connection into each house. It is to be hoped this can be accelerated.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Does the Minister have any idea when we will have an updated timeline for these possible accelerations?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** There is none at present but, having spoken to the national broadband operator, I understand there is certainly a desire on its part to do whatever it can. There is the same desire in the Department and across government. I do not, however, want to make any false promise. As I said, it is a hugely complex project and there will be a variety of technical, planning and other resource issues that the operator will have to work on.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** The Minister is dealing with the operator with a view to accelerating provision where possible.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Our whole approach is to try to encourage as fast a delivery as possible.

**Chairman:** I have just a couple of questions. What has been the impact of Covid on the roll-out of the national broadband plan? I note the Minister is looking to expedite the roll-out. Taking into account Covid, what has been his interaction with National Broadband Ireland on these two areas?

There was a report in the *The Sunday Business Post* at the weekend that there are two state aid complaints lodged against the national broadband plan with the European Commission. What impact does the Minister think that will have? Is he aware of these complaints and their financial impact on the national broadband plan? What has been his interaction with the European Commission on these two complaints?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The European Commission will have to go about its work. I have to be careful as a Minister of a national government not to pre-empt the outcome in that regard. However, having seen this project go through so much detailed planning and preparation work over the years, I am very confident it meets state aid requirements. There was in my mind a clear market gap and a real difficulty in that certain areas of the country were not getting effective, fast, fibre-speed broadband. The market was never really going to deliver it. The need for it is also clear. It is central to social as well as economic development. People are entitled to take whatever cases they want to the European Commission, but I do not see that stopping us in any way progressing this. We have the necessary approvals and consensus Government

decision-making, so I do not see that any such case will decelerate or divert us, unless, as I said, down the line the European Union makes a decision or ruling in that regard. I do not expect one, however, and it is to be hoped this will not affect the roll-out of the plan.

The impact of Covid on the national broadband plan really brings home the absolute urgency of us having universal high-speed broadband coverage. There is huge potential in this country for us to change our whole working patterns. I hope we will not stay at level 5 restrictions. There will be a return to work and I think it is important that we try to accelerate that as quickly as we can. There are real benefits to be gained from people being in offices working with colleagues.

**Chairman:** Does the Minister expect the time period for the national broadband plan to be reduced? It is currently over seven years.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Yes, but as I stated, the vast majority of it will be delivered in the first four years. It is likely that there will be further delay for those very distant locations where it takes extra work. It is the Government's desire to try to accelerate it as fast as we can, while not putting additional financial burden on the State or taking risks around-----

**Chairman:** The fact is that people working from home has now become very much centre stage, and even more so in the Covid environment.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** That makes the case for it. One of the real advantages of what is happening is that we have the potential within four or five years of having the vast majority of houses connected in that way to a significantly improved service. It is not just the national broadband plan, while it is an important part of the mix, but there are other significant private sector investments by Eir, for example, which is rolling out its network to provide similar speed connectivity, the Liberty Global investment in our cable network, the investment by the likes of SIRO in conjunction with Vodafone, and the investment of other companies. What we want is a competitive market where there is a variety of companies and operators competing to deliver the fastest possible service at the lowest price. Where there is not a market case for it, that is where the national broadband plan steps in. In my recent meetings with various industrial companies and people considering investing in the country-----

**Chairman:** I presume the Minister has engaged with National Broadband Ireland and the companies that are rolling out connectivity.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Yes, and the message I got from them is that they are keen to accelerate it as best they can. I said the same, but I recognise that we should not give any false hope on it. We have not really started laying out the fibre to houses. As that starts to happen, we will have to see if the timelines are working and if we can accelerate them.

**Chairman:** When does the Minister envisage seeing fibre going to houses?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It will start before the end of this year.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I wish to pose some questions on broadband. The Minister is correct to say the need for high-quality Internet has never been greater with many people now working from home, and third-level students having to study from home as well. As I see it, there are a number of problems. First, there is a problem with physically running cables underground or carrying them overground as the case may be. Another problem that has come to light in my constituency in Clare concerns Eircode postcodes. All broadband installers are

required to have an Eircode in order to make a transaction on the phone, to book a person in for a connection and to get them live and online.

I will refer to the experience of a constituent whose case has been replicated throughout the country. A person contacted An Post in August, two months before moving into a brand new home, to get an Eircode generated in the quickest possible time as the couple would both be working from home and they wanted live broadband in their house. They were told by An Post that their details had been captured and that they would be fed into a process but, crucially, they were told that Eircode postcodes are only generated every three or four months so they would be waiting for the next intake of postcodes. They phoned every broadband provider possible because there is broadband in front of their property, but one cannot get it unless one has an Eircode. They have since contacted An Post just to see where everything is at and they were told the Eircode data are not shared between Eircode to An Post until about two days before they are generated. So the person who initially tried to get an Eircode in August, hoping to have broadband in the property in September or October may now have to wait until either late November or possibly even up until February if there was a delay in the details being captured. I ask the Minister to comment on that.

The second issue I wish to raise concerns the go-to website, *fibrerollout.ie*, which we all check to find out where broadband is available in an area and when it is coming to specific localities. It lacks full clarity. When people search for Eircode postcodes it does not tell us enough. We need to know more about broadband roll-out at county level. I would like the Minister to respond to those two queries.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** If there is a difficulty or delay in anyone getting access to an Eircode I would be happy for Deputy Crowe to send me the details of the particular constituent and I will make sure that we follow it up because it is important that people are able to access the services that are being provided. One of the difficulties in the past is that people were saying Eircode postcodes would not be used. It is frustrating to hear that postcodes are not being provided where people do want to use them.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** If we could move beyond the quarterly generation of postcodes to an automatic system of generation, that would be more efficient.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will certainly follow that up because given the digital systems we are engaged with here, I would be interested to see whether An Post can assist, in particular given that it is connected to the ability to get other services. I was just looking at some of the figures and it is interesting to see that it is working in the sense that Amárach carried out research about three years ago which showed that 84% of respondents were able to supply a validated Eircode for their address. The increasing usage of Eircode postcodes is very pronounced in recent years.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I would also like to get county-level, localised detail rather than amber coloured maps. People want to know when it is coming to their village or when it is going beyond the crossroads up to their road. That is the level of detail we would love to see. We know it is happening but we only know it is happening when we pass an installation crew going down a road in trucks. There is no sharing of information. It is big blocks of colour on a map. I think we need to provide more detail to us as politicians who often field these queries but more importantly for the general public.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I agree. We must be careful as there was an issue around privacy

when Eircode postcodes were first considered in terms of being able to get right down to an individual area. The Data Protection Commissioner set certain restrictions in terms of what granular level of data would be available on properties. Having said that, *fibrerollout.ie* is an Eir website. What the Department is responsible for is the national broadband plan, NBP, website, *nbi.ie*, where details of the NBP roll-out are shared and where people can register for details. Is the Deputy's constituent in a national broadband area?

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** It is, but it lacks all detail. That is replicated right through County Clare. It is coming, but when is it coming? If there were approximate timeframes that would help to a great extent. People are planning futures around this and how they work from home. A lot of people are potentially facing perhaps another 12 or 18 months of working from home but they do not know if it is sustainable.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** As I said, the roll-out is starting this year. It has been delayed somewhat by Covid in terms of the inability to get workers and have working around the country. I am going on memory but I think one of the next counties to be served is Limerick. I cannot remember the status of the roll-out in Clare but I will try to get the Department to provide Deputy Crowe with a background assessment, to the best of our ability, of the timeline and the projected approach for counties.

**Chairman:** Is the Department aware of the difficulties with the provision of Eircode postcodes?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I have a note here from the Department confirming that postcodes are updated on a quarterly basis and it is a matter for individual commercial businesses to apply and integrate the latest Eircode updates into the systems.

**Chairman:** In line with Deputy Crowe's question, if one is looking to expedite rural broadband then, by definition, we have to find a way to expedite the provision of postcodes to individuals so that they can feed into the process. Given that postcodes come under his remit, would the Minister undertake to look at the provision of new Eircode addresses to link in with applications for broadband?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Certainly, and the Department is working on it. I just got some figures which show that the percentage of requests for an Eircode for existing addresses is answered within five days. I am told that for 2020 the output target is 99% and that we are on target in that regard. The percentage of new addresses allocated an Eircode within five weeks is also 99% and, again, we are on target. The quarterly experience referenced by Deputy Cathal Crowe is unusual. It is the one in 100 unfortunate example. In 99% of cases an Eircode is provided within five weeks.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** The Minister is certain that Eircodes can be generated overnight or in a matter of weeks.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** For existing addresses, it is a matter of days and for new addresses, in 99% of cases, it is five weeks.

**Chairman:** If there are exceptions as set out by Deputy Crowe, it would be important that we look into them because each of those exceptions is a household.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Yes, in particular because it allows people to tap into other services.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** In this case, the husband and wife have been asked by their employers to work from home. They are checking in daily if an Eircode has been generated but it has not. It appears that an IT or administrative conundrum is denying them a service that is available at their front gate but needs to be cabled into their living room. It is a simple fix, I believe.

**Chairman:** It is a throwback to the prioritisation of home telephone installations 30 or 40 years ago. Does Deputy Ó Murchú wish to ask a question?

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** My question relates to the future of post offices. The Irish Postmasters Union and the Grant Thornton report state there is a requirement for a public service obligation, PSO, of around €17 million. Combined with that is post office access to government and financial services, which fits with the banks ending their front-facing services. We all know of the difficulties in rural Ireland. We need to keep as much capacity as possible. The post office is a major part of that. What are the Government's plans to ensure we have a viable service that is fit for purpose?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The post office network is critical to the development of rural and urban Ireland. It is an essential part of a modern economy and it has a key role. There will be an ongoing decrease in the broader sense in An Post in letter-type post, but we expect the parcel business to increase significantly. This will strengthen the network and post offices as part of that network will be important. What we have seen with An Post is the broadening of the business beyond that and a recognition that in financial services and the provision of government services there is a way to replace some of the lost revenues, including in areas such as social welfare provision and other areas as they decline. The town centres first project is examining how we can use post offices in this way as a local hub for public services. Deputy Michael Moynihan's proposed development in north-west Cork of a community enterprise hub around a post office network is a case in point. We need that scale of ambition in regard to post offices.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** A one-stop-shop hub as regards Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, grants, etc.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I have engaged with the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, on how we can provide support for those types of examples. We are already doing it in a variety of different locations. Where people are not commuting long distances and are working remotely, we need to look at the possibility of government providing local services such that people do not have to do so from home but can access a range of services locally, including broadband connectivity. It is these types of innovative measures that we need to be looking at doing now.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Is the Government considering putting in place a plan as opposed to allowing this to happen on an *ad hoc* basis?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, is very keen on the issue. I am keen to work with her on how post offices can be part of the hub centre provision. This service will not be provided exclusively by post offices but they might be one location that would be very suitable to it.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** If the Minister could provide further details, it would be very helpful because this is an issue we will be dealing with at a later stage.

**Chairman:** In the Revised Estimate €1.7 million is provided for cybersecurity, which is an



area within the Minister's communications remit. I ask him to expand on that spend and how he sees policy in this area developing. This is a big issue for the general public in terms of online abuse of users.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It is a complex issue. If I understand the Chairman correctly stated he is concerned about harassment on social media.

**Chairman:** Correct.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** That is a separate issue that comes within the remit of a variety of Ministers, including the Ministers for Justice and Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

**Chairman:** Does it not fall within the Minister's remit?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Not in this particular area. The issue of cybersecurity relevant to my Department is around the security of the network, including security from cyber attacks and other illicit, illegal-----

**Chairman:** It is the structure.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It is around protection of the network from out-of-state operators, terrorists or other nefarious sources that may be looking to undermine the network, under companies within it or threaten the security of the State. It is a real issue. It is critical that these networks are secure. The unit in my Department works with the Defence Forces and An Garda Síochána to bring some of the best skills to this area. It is on the high-level network security side that my Department tends to concentrate.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister. Deputy Cathal Crowe has two minutes remaining. We need to conclude soon.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** The Minister may or may not know Tom O'Callaghan, a constituent of mine from County Clare who leads an organisation called the Independent Postmasters Group. Over the years, he has come to the Oireachtas a number of times to present and outline the challenges faced by the post office sector, particularly rural post offices facing closure. He and others have come forward with a range of solutions up to and including adopting a model akin to the Kiwi post banking system that operates in New Zealand. An independent report has been produced by Grant Thornton and motions were passed in the previous Dáil in regard to supporting post offices. I would like to hear from the Minister if there are plans to implement any of those proposals and how he proposes to save rural post offices from closure. As he will appreciate, beyond the pub, shop, school and post office, there is little else going on in most rural villages. The post office is a key service. A recent Red C poll backs up the position that people want and demand a rural post office network. I would welcome a response from the Minister in regard to how he proposes to take on and support some of the initiatives brought forward by Tom O'Callaghan and others who have been campaigning to save post offices.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Deputy may not be aware of it but I have been involved for a number of years with Seamus Boland from Irish Rural Link in regard to the work it has been doing, including in the area of public banking and how to build up local banking systems and services in a regional rural way. That was interesting work because An Post was similarly looking at the possibility of expanding its branch of banking services and it is now doing that work. It has done that work over the years in conjunction with companies such as AIB and others,

for which they provide a front-of-house service. It is a valid service. It has been particularly important as some of the commercial banks have withdrawn some of their branch networks. It is important that we still have the capability to get counter services. An Post does a lot of good work in that regard. Banking and financial services is changing. We are seeing more mobile banking applications coming on stream and this is likely to continue. I am not sure if anybody here has a Revolut card or knows somebody who has one. It is one of a range of new services that has come on stream. I expect and believe that An Post and, in particular, the post office network can continue to have a significant role through their expansion to new services in the financial services area, including the provision of credit cards. Recently, An Post introduced a new product for people looking to retrofit their homes, in respect of which it is working in conjunction with Scottish and Southern Energy, SSE, an energy expert company. SSE, through another company it is working with, is providing finance for this together with packaging and marketing it. It is those sorts of financial services products that An Post should, and will, go into. It will be difficult. When I was in this role previously, An Post went into the banking area and then had to withdraw during the financial crisis. There are risks involved in entering that market. It is necessary to be good at lending and to build up lending skills and expertise, and that is not easy to do. It is critical how that will be done, and we should proceed slowly to ensure we do not have a repeat of what happened in 2010.

I point out to Mr. O'Callaghan and others that one of the real advantages the An Post network has is that it is trusted. Post offices are often run by families who have been there for generations. They are seen as centres of the community and people have a real respect for them. In the area of financial services, that is, and always will be, an important consideration. That is one of the ways in which the network could be a centre for financial services.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister. We need to conclude and be out of here soon. I call Deputy Carey who has four minutes.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I thank the Minister for engaging with the committee. Turning to broadband and the ongoing roll-out of the national broadband contract, I welcome the progress made to date. There is an information deficit, however. It would be useful if people yearning for broadband had information on what is happening. That is particularly the case now when so many people are working from home. Those people need to know when they will be enabled. It would be useful if the Minister could inform the counties in the intervention areas about when they will be enabled with broadband and break down that information into detail about different counties. That would allow those counties to plan in advance.

I receive many representations every day from people in different parts of County Clare asking when they will receive broadband. I would like to hear the Minister's response on that question. We need to look ahead and plan. The contract has been awarded and the roll-out is under way, but people need to know when they will get broadband in their areas.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I agree with the Deputy that this is a critical issue, and that is why the State is investing in this area. I will give a broad outline of what this year's priorities were because these Estimates concern those processes. The contract was signed just less than a year ago. It involves 140,000 km of fibre cable. The primary work done to date has involved surveying. That has involved going to several hundred thousand houses and mapping out how it will be possible to get broadband to them. That process takes a good deal of time.

In the meantime, as was also agreed in the contract, work has also been ongoing regarding the broadband connection points. There are approximately 300 of them and they are often in a

community centre, a school, a post office or other similar location. Those are now starting to be delivered and are broadly on time. The first houses will begin to be connected in counties Cork and Cavan at the end of this year and the roll-out will continue in Limerick next year.

NBI and the local authorities are going to send out details to residents. They can only do so, however, 18 months in advance. For people to find out where they will be in 18 months, it is necessary for them to register on

*www.nbi.ie* for updates, as I mentioned. That is the way in which people can find out the information. I do not have the indicative roll-out plan with me. I told Deputy Crowe earlier that I would try to get the Department to provide details for County Clare.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** It would be useful if people knew where they stood in respect of this project. It is very welcome, but there is a lack of information. That information exists and the contract has been broken down into different sections across the country, as I understand it. County Clare is in that plan. The plan is there, and we need to outline the details and tell people when they will be getting broadband. There are some outrageous cases. In one case in Ogoneloe, County Clare where all the houses, except three in the middle, have broadband. The neighbours of those people on the left and right have broadband. That is just one example. We need to know the details and these people need to know when there will be broadband.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I can give the Deputy some details. The information I have regarding County Clare is that the surveys I mentioned earlier are under way in Cratloe, Ballycannon, Ballyglass, Cloghera, and Kilcasheen is due to start by the end of the year. Turning to the broadband connection points, those are located in Caherconnell, Cree community centre, Loop Head and the Michael Cusack Visitor Centre. Kilmurry McMahon, Shragh, Ennistymon and Stonehall national schools are all to be connected with high-speed broadband as part of the initiative. I will forward on whatever details I can share to the Deputy.

**Chairman:** Why is that information not available? Deputy Carey's point concerns why it is not possible for a member of the public in Clare to go on to the NBI website and find that information straightaway.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** People can, and should, register on that website.

**Chairman:** Why is it necessary for them to register? Why is the information not publicly available?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will have to respond later with that information.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** A fundamental point is that we are rolling out a very welcome multi-billion euro project but there is a lack of information. We need to get that information to the public because they need to know where they stand. The Minister has an obligation to get that information into the public domain because he has a responsibility in this area. I refer to that information being made readily available where people can look it up and know for certain that they are going to get broadband.

**Chairman:** I ask the Minister to come back to the committee with a precise update.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will do that to the best of my ability. I agree that we should provide whatever information we can. We must be conscious, however, to not to give false promises. We have not yet started rolling out broadband to houses. We must see how delivery is working

and get a better idea of the timing in respect of this project. I understand that negotiations are still ongoing, for example, regarding the use of ESB or Eir poles in certain locations. Much of the work done to date is surveying, and that was done with a view to establishing how it will be best to manage the rest of the project. One of the reasons, therefore, that the information is not yet available is because those decisions have not been made. Significant survey work was required to map out each individual connectivity situation.

**Chairman:** The Minister might come back to us on these issues and we will do some more work on broadband. It is a major issue for our committee.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It is.

**Chairman:** Is Deputy Carey okay with that?

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I would like to ask some more questions, if there is time.

**Chairman:** The problem is we have committed to leaving the room. How much longer does the Deputy need?

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I just have a question on the Limerick northern distributor road. I asked the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, about that issue last week. She responded that it was a project under the remit of the Minister.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** That is correct.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** It is a strategically important route. The first phase will go to construction next year, and that runs from Coonagh to Knockalisheen. The second phase is critically important for the University of Limerick, UL, Limerick Institute of Technology, LIT, and the city of Limerick in respect of the movement of traffic. It is important for the region, in fact. A strategic development zone is planned for the UL campus. Companies in the foreign direct investment, FDI, sector have been screaming at me, as have members of IBEC, with all of them seeking freer movement of traffic throughout Limerick city. I would like an update regarding the status of that essential project for the region. That would be fantastic.

**Chairman:** We must be conscious of the time.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I wonder where that question fits into the communications Estimate.

**Chairman:** The Minister can respond to us later on that point.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I was only being flippant. I am happy to sit here and talk for hours.

**Chairman:** The problem is that we must be conscious of time.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I would love to take a long time to talk about Limerick transport and set the scene. I had a very good meeting last week. The Chairman is correct. There is significant interest in the Limerick transport study. There was a meeting with a range of interest groups, including the chamber of commerce, campaigning groups and others. There is great potential in Limerick to revitalise the city and develop it. The development of Limerick will thrive when we implement the national planning framework. It will bring life back into the city centre. When we have what is called transport-led development in cities like Limerick-----

**Chairman:** That is important. I am conscious that we have a joint committee meeting with other members. The Minister is probably aware of the first stage of the northern distributor

road. There is a document for approval before him that will be a key element-----

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Chairman has a keen interest in this. I genuinely believe that-----

**Chairman:** I am frustrated by the fact that we cannot deal with this now.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** This cannot be answered in the minute before the end of a timeline. I believe there is significant potential for the development of Limerick around its rail network and some of these measures are not in existing plans or schemes.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** What about support for Shannon Airport?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Absolutely. Our ambition for how Limerick can develop through public transport needs to skyrocket. It is deliverable. The development of the Foynes rail line is something we need to do to develop the Shannon region and its industrial capability. As the Deputy will be aware, the line-----

**Chairman:** Minister, with due respect, there are other members. This matter can be dealt with in the next session. If members wish to use that meeting to deal with this issue, we will do that. I am conscious that we have an important-----

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I would be happy to give it as much time as possible.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister for attending and engaging with the committee. He will attend the meeting of the joint committee. I would love to deal with the issues, but I am conscious that there is a joint committee hearing with other members who are not present.

### Message to Dáil

**Chairman:** In accordance with Standing Order 101, the following message will be sent to the Dáil:

The Select Committee on Transport and Communications Networks has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for public services for the year ending 31 December 2020: Vote 29 - Environment, Climate and Communications.

The select committee adjourned at 12.22 p.m. *sine die*.