Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Mobile Phone & Broadband Taskforce

Meeting Minutes

15/12/2021

Prepared by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications
and the Department of Rural and Community Development
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Orientation Meeting of the State Stakeholders, ComReg and the ASAI

Date: Wednesday 15th December 2021

Venue: Virtual meeting hosted via Zoom due to COVID restrictions

Time: 14:00 – 15.30

Attendees: Minister of State Ossian Smyth, T.D. (co-Chair), Minister Heather Humphreys, T.D. (co-Chair), Ciarán Ó hÓbáin (D/ECC), Fintan O'Brien (D/RCD), Ethna Brogan (D/Transport), Andrew Ebrill (D/Transport), Patrick Neary (D/ECC), Rory Hinchy (D/ECC), Pauric McPhillips (D/RCD), Brian Loughlin (D/HLGH), Paddy Mahon (CCMA), Peter Burke (LGMA), Paul Fox (LGMA), Stephen Flynn (RMO), Garrett Blaney (ComReg), Barbara Delaney (ComReg), Jill Slater (ComReg) and Orla Twomey (ASAI)

Observers: Mairéad McCabe (D/ECC), Stjohn O'Connor (D/RCD)

Secretariat: Jane Dooley (D/ECC)

Dept. Officials: Jake Ryan (D/RCD)

Apologies: Catherine Eddery (OPW), Terry Sheridan (D/HLGH)

1. Opening Remarks – Minister Heather Humphreys and Minister of State Ossian Smyth

- Minister Humphreys and Minister of State Smyth opened the meeting, extending their thanks to all participants for their commitment and willingness to kick off the next iteration of the Taskforce in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration, together with Industry.
- The various achievements of the previous Work Programme of the Taskforce were acknowledged, along with the tangible, long-lasting, positive impacts they have had on telecommunications infrastructure deployment and for the people of rural Ireland. Key achievements involving collaboration between Departments, organisations and Industry were noted, to name but a few:
    - work by the Broadband Officers in Local Authorities on navigating the licensing and permitting regime,
    - collaboration between the CCMA, LGMA and RMO on the implementation of the standardised charging regime,
    - work by ComReg on its National Coverage Map and coverage repeaters; and
    - work by the ASAI on the guidance note for marketing telecoms services.
- The various stakeholder subgroups established under the previous Work Programme of the Taskforce including the Joint Utility Local Authority Group (JULA), the Road Openings Monitoring Committee (ROMC) and the Telecommunications Action Group (TAG) continue to meet regularly to address issues of common interest at the appropriate level and their ongoing success was noted.
- Both Minister of State Ossian Smyth and Minister Humphreys look forward to working collaboratively with the Taskforce and to building on all its previous successes in alleviating barriers to telecommunications infrastructure rollout and to further bridging the urban/ rural digital divide.

2. Opening Remarks from Assistant Secretaries Ciarán Ó hÓbáin of D/ECC and Fintan O'Brien of D/RCD

- Assistant Secretaries of D/ECC (Ciarán Ó hÓbáin) and D/RCD (Fintan O'Brien) respectively provided further rationale and policy context to the work of the Taskforce. The fact that remaining barriers to deployment must continue to be tackled notwithstanding that the NBP is now being rolled out was highlighted, along

with the need for the Taskforce to take a new, more focused strategic direction into the future to bring about tangible benefits to the citizens of Ireland. A mutual recognition of the need for a whole of Government approach to addressing remaining issues was noted.

- Acknowledging the work done throughout the pandemic period to ensure that telecommunications networks and services continued to be managed and delivered in a stable and reliable fashion, and the specific measures taken to ensure remote working and connectivity could be supported during Covid-19, Ciarán Ó hÓbáin confirmed that both Departments had worked together in the background to ensure continuity and improvement.
- Noting in particular the work that has been done by the Taskforce in the interim period between now and the last formal meeting in 2019, particularly in relation to the Section 254 licensing issue, Mr. Ó hÓbáin called out two key priority areas that D/ECC considers crucial to include in the new Work Programme:
    - improving and ensuring ease of access to State property to support the rollout of telecommunications infrastructure and additionally in relation to the sharing of private infrastructure; and
    - ensuring that broadband connectivity is sufficiently supported in new builds in line with the requirements of the EU Broadband Cost Reduction Directive.
- Fintan O'Brien discussed the importance of the work of the Taskforce in delivering on the ambitions and commitments set out in the *'Optimising Digital Connectivity'* chapter of *'Our Rural Future – Rural Development Policy 2021-2025'*. The chapter highlights the transformative impact that can be achieved for rural Ireland through the provision of mobile phone and broadband connectivity and specifically highlights the crucial role that the Taskforce plays and will continue to play in achieving those objectives.

3. Overview of the Proposed Direction for the New Work Programme of the Taskforce

- It was outlined that the objective of the new proposed Work Programme of the Taskforce (yet to be finalised) will be to:
    - provide solutions to broadband/ mobile phone coverage deficits; and
    - address other barriers to telecoms infrastructure rollout.

- Whilst the previous Work Programme delivered over 70 actions dealing mainly with the 'low-hanging fruit' (i.e., areas that were relatively straightforward to address), it was noted that the next phase of the Taskforce will have to deal with a changed landscape where the issues are more complex, requiring greater examination and collaboration and most likely, longer associated timelines for delivery.
- The purpose of the orientation meeting was to bring together all State stakeholders of the Taskforce, ComReg (acting in its independent advisory capacity to the Taskforce) and the ASAI, to discuss what areas the Taskforce should seek to address in its new Work Programme.
- Each organisation was called upon to propose a number of priority areas/ actions from their organisation's perspective that could be suitably housed under the key thematic headings which will form the foundation of a new, dynamic Work, thus:
    1. Build on the earlier work of the Taskforce to assist consumers in best understanding connectivity options and consumer choices available to them;
    2. Streamlining permit-granting/consenting processes, improving data repositories, and access to key public sector information to assist in the deployment of telecoms infrastructure and services, especially in relation to reducing costs of deployment;
    3. Facilitating open and ease of access for network operators to publicly and privately owned assets;
    4. Identifying additional initiatives to improve geographic mobile coverage in rural and remote areas (especially following the Multi Band Spectrum Award II); and
    5. Providing a forum for information-sharing on developments and emerging technologies in the telecommunications sector, including in relation to the implementation of the EU Connectivity Toolbox in Ireland.
- The intention is for the Taskforce to meet 2-3 times annually, however if required, additional meetings will be convened.

4. Proposed Priority Areas/Actions by Stakeholders for Potential Inclusion in the New Work Programme of the Taskforce

Department of Transport

- From **D/Transport**, Ethna Brogan summarised the considerable progress that has been made since 2016 in collaboration with the Stakeholders of the Taskforce, particularly working closely with Transport Infrastructure Ireland, the CCMA and the LGMA in relation to a number of national and local roads projects. Other work done to date which has produced lasting benefits for all users have included:
    - the revision of the Purple Book – guidelines for managing openings in public roads; and
    - the further streamlining of permit granting processes via the rollout of the MapRoad Licensing (MRL) System.
- D/Transport will work closely with D/ECC, D/RCD and the aforementioned stakeholders in January to identify tangible actions to build upon these successes for inclusion in the new Work Programme of the Taskforce.

Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

- Representing **D/HLGH**, Brian Loughlin touched on D/HLGH's significant achievements to date working closely with the Taskforce stakeholders, which include to name a few:
    - various necessary exemptions introduced to the Planning and Development Act, 2000, as amended, for certain types of telecoms infrastructure deployment; and
    - improvements to the Section 254 licensing process in relation to laying broadband cabling over public roads and introducing certainty regarding permit fees.
- D/HLGH looks forward to bilaterally meeting with D/ECC and D/RCD in January to finalise further actions that will build on these successes for inclusion in the new Work Programme.

The CCMA, LGMA and RMO

- Representatives from the **CCMA, LGMA** and **RMO** discussed the various areas considered important to prioritise in the new Work Programme of the Taskforce from their respective organisations' perspectives:
    - Further improvements needed to implementation of the Section 254 licensing regime (whilst acknowledging the great work that has been done to improve processes to date);
    - improvements to be made to infrastructure-sharing and co-location processes above and beyond what is already required by the EECC;
    - organising for operators to provide in a structured manner an indication of planned works for the upcoming period so as to allow LAs to adequately forward-plan for volumes of anticipated applications and opportunities for streamlining multiple road and duct openings; and
    - improving the level of data available to operators regarding available State property to facilitate telecoms infrastructure rollout.

The Commission for Communications Regulation

- Representatives from **ComReg** Garret Blaney, Chairperson, and Barbara Delaney, Director – Retail and Consumer Services, indicated their willingness to advise and support the work of the Taskforce as much as they can. Areas that ComReg will address over the coming period include:
    - Improving information awareness campaigns to users regarding new technology – this might include further enhancement of ComReg's national outdoor coverage map to incorporate 5G, enabling citizens to compare services available to them from both a coverage and cost perspective;
    - Bridging the information gap amongst elder age cohorts regarding current and emerging technologies further to and pending any additional consultation needed with Age Friendly Ireland;
    - Addressing any questions and issues that may arise at the local level in discussion with BBOs and LAs addressing the experience on the ground for consumers;
    - Further research on data needs and consumer experience, building on and updating research conducted to date in this space;

- Presenting to the Taskforce on key updates regarding market trends from ComReg's quarterly reports;
- Improving information regarding permit-granting procedures via ComReg's Site-Viewer functionality and in its capacity as Single Information Point (SIP) in the context of the Broadband Cost Reduction Directive and accompanying Regulations;
- ComReg is undertaking a review of the issue of ease of access of operators to physical infrastructure which will be important to guide the work of the Taskforce on the access to State Assets work stream;
- ComReg is committed to improving and advising on the issue of geographic coverage in rural and coverage blackspot areas; and
- ComReg will continue to engage closely with NECC to ensure that existing networks are resilient and secure.

- ComReg also indicated its willingness to take further suggestions for potential actions they might pursue to support the work of the Taskforce, recognising that the next Work Programme will be dynamic in nature.

The Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland

- Representing the **ASAI**, Orla Twomey referred to the ASAI's role in promoting and developing advertising standards and communications and indicated her willingness to work with the Taskforce to support its objectives into the future as part of the new Work Programme. Key areas for consideration mentioned by Ms Twomey included:
  - Whilst telecoms advertising can generate a substantive number of complaints due to the transactional nature of the sector, very few of such complaints are typically upheld considering that most concern the quality of and misunderstanding of services offered, rather than the actual advertising itself. The guidance note produced as part of the Taskforce's previous Work Programme can be reviewed and enhanced as necessary; and
  - In the context of the Climate Action Plan and the strive for companies to achieve competitive difference, an area that the ASAI will be monitoring carefully going forward will include claims by different brands, to include telecoms, regarding the accuracy of references made to the work they are

doing in relation to climate action and achieving organisational environmental sustainability.

Issues from Industry's perspective discussed prior to the orientation meeting

- D/ECC (Mairéad McCabe) then summarised the details of a recent constructive discussion between D/ECC, D/RCD and **Ibec (Telecommunications Industry Ireland)**, in relation to the areas which the telecommunications sector would like to see addressed as part of the new Work Programme of the Taskforce which included:
    - Reviewing LA permitting/ license granting policies and processes with regard to telecoms works to ensure consistency nationwide – whilst it is well-recognised that the system as a whole is working well, statistical reports from the RMO reveal small pockets of inconsistency which may need a targeted Taskforce approach;
    - More focused interaction between D/ECC and the Taskforce on the implementation of the EU Connectivity Toolbox in Ireland (a set of best practices identified by the Commission in collaboration with all Member States to support optimal efficiency in the rollout of telecoms networks) – Ibec has indicated its willingness to feed into ideas for implementation and D/ECC will keep the Taskforce updated on progress as part of its annual reporting;
    - In relation to the area of planning, TII is willing to work to assist in the development of common approaches needed to facilitate open access for the rollout of fibre to new developments and housing whilst ensuring that a situation of monopoly service providers in individual developments does not emerge;
    - Reviewing of Planning exemptions for certain types of telecoms infrastructure rollout with particular regard to the issue of the height of certain dwellings;
    - Updating of guidelines for An Bórd Pleanála (ABP) and all LAs with regard to timelines for permit-granting processes to ensure consistency across the board; and
    - Ensuring that effective administrative arrangements can be provided for in respect of the specific stakeholders Industry would need to engage with in order to gain access to State assets to facilitate telecoms infrastructure rollout.

- Industry recognises and appreciates that many of these issues are complex and consequently may take some time to address. Ibec will work closely with all stakeholders of the Taskforce on these issues as appropriate and has additionally offered to organise presentations to be delivered to the Taskforce periodically regarding the latest relevant technological developments in the telecoms sector.

5. Next Steps and AOB

- Minister Humphreys and Minister of State Smyth closed the orientation meeting and conveyed their mutual optimism and determination to develop a meaningful Work Programme.
- Next steps to be taken prior to the next formal meeting of the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce in February which will involve attendance from Industry include:
    - D/ECC and D/RCD will arrange a series of bilateral discussions with the individual stakeholders of the Taskforce early in the new year, to identify and finalise clear, tangible actions for delivery as part of the new Work Programme;
    - A draft Work Programme will be developed for discussion and approval at the next meeting of the Taskforce along with accompanying terms of reference; and
    - A press release will issue shortly after the orientation meeting.