Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce

REPORT ON NATIONAL STAKEHOLDER FORUM
6 OCTOBER 2017

Department of Rural and
Community Development

An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail

Roinn Cumarsáide, Gníomhaithe
ar son na hAeráide & Comhshaoil
Department of Communications,
Climate Action & Environment

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Acknowledgements

The Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, and the Department of Rural and Community Development would like to express our thanks to everyone who attended the Forum on 6 October and engaged in the discussions throughout the day. Your contribution and views on the issues being discussed will play an important role in formulating the future work programme of the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce.

We would particularly like to express our gratitude to the moderators, rapporteurs and panellists for their important contribution to the event, and their active participation in the thematic breakout sessions. The interactive discussion sessions were a vital element of the event programme and the success of these was largely due to the time and commitment which each of the participants invested in preparing for the event and contributing to the sessions on the day of the Forum.

We would also like to thank all of the action holders and stakeholders involved in the delivery of actions set out in the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce Report published in December 2016. While we have made great progress to date, we would ask for your continued commitment and engagement as your input is critical to ensuring the full implementation of all the identified actions.

About the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce

The Programme for a Partnership Government committed to the establishment within 100 days of a mobile phone and broadband taskforce to consider immediate measures to address telecommunications deficits in rural Ireland.

The Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce was established in July 2016. The role of the Taskforce was to examine solutions to address broadband/mobile phone coverage deficits and to identify tangible actions that can be taken to improve the quality of broadband and mobile phone services being provided to citizens across Ireland.

The Taskforce Report was published in December 2016 and set out 40 actions to alleviate barriers to mobile reception and broadband access. The Taskforce identified a number of areas where direct action by Government Departments and State Agencies can ensure accelerated benefits to consumers from industry investments.

Actions outlined in the report focus on optimising network performance, improving consistency in relation to planning procedures, enhancing access to infrastructure, engaging with stakeholders on issues impacting on the rollout of telecommunications infrastructure, and equipping consumers to make informed decisions on available products and services.

A full copy of the Taskforce Report can be found on the Departments' websites.

About the Forum

Action 1 of the Taskforce Report commits to holding "an annual forum for all stakeholders to discuss issues impacting on the rollout of telecoms infrastructure". The Department of Rural and Community Development and the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment were jointly tasked with organising the event.

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Denis Naughten T.D. and Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development, Seán Kyne co-hosted the Forum which took place on Friday, 6 October 2017 in the Athlone Springs Hotel.

Attendees at the event were from a diverse range of stakeholder backgrounds, including, amongst others telecommunication companies, the Regulator (ComReg), local authorities and relevant Government Departments.

Primary Objective of the Forum:
The primary goal of the Forum was to bring together key stakeholders to engage in an open dialogue on issues impacting on the rollout of telecommunications infrastructure. It also afforded an opportunity for stakeholders to highlight any barriers being experienced in the implementation of actions identified by the Taskforce, and to suggest new recommendations for the Taskforce Implementation Group to adopt in order to accelerate the provision of improved services to consumers.

Structure of the Forum:
The structure of the event encompassed a facilitated high-level interactive panel discussion, with representatives drawn from the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer, ComReg, Virgin Media, Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, and the County and City Management Association.

Following the high level panel discussion, four thematic breakout sessions, aligned with the original subgroups of the Taskforce, took place.

Each session was facilitated by a moderator and comprised panel members from industry, Government Departments and State bodies. A rapporteur captured the discussion from each session and conveyed the key messages back to an afternoon plenary session.

The thematic breakout sessions, along with highlighting awareness of the current status of many of the actions underway, have given rise to a number of new recommendations or actions for consideration in the future work of the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce. The discussions which took place at the Forum will also inform the forthcoming Annual Review of the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce.

The Forum also provided an important networking opportunity for stakeholders to engage on a one-to-one basis, and we would encourage the stakeholders to continue those bilateral engagements which are vitally important in removing barriers to the deployment of high quality telecommunications networks across the country.

This report provides an overview of the issues raised at the four thematic breakout sessions and also areas raised for consideration in the future work of the Taskforce.

Outcomes from the Thematic Breakout Sessions

The objective of the four thematic breakout sessions which took place at the Forum was twofold:

    (i)   to identify gaps/persistent issues affecting the delivery of the Taskforce Actions; and

    (ii) to identify new actions which need to be captured and added to the 40 original actions identified by the Taskforce.

Theme 1: Access to Infrastructure

This breakout session explored the ability of operators to access appropriate locations to house their infrastructure and equipment in order to deliver telecommunications services effectively and reach the widest possible number of consumers.

Road Opening issues

Industry welcomed the publication of the revised Guidelines for Managing Road Openings in Public Roads (Purple Book). However it requested a mechanism be established to enable it to provide feedback on its implementation. Micro trenching was also raised as an issue for further discussion.

It was agreed that there was a need for standardisation across local authorities regarding access, wayleaves, micro trenching and installing poles. While industry welcomed standardisation of charges for road opening licences, they requested engagement with the City and County Managers Association (CCMA) around the levels at which the standardised rates are set, so as not to inhibit investment by the sector.

Need for "joined up thinking"

A collaborative approach is developing between stakeholders which is paying dividends in terms of progressing specific actions to address barriers to the delivery of telecoms services to consumers.

There is an opportunity to build upon this joined up approach, particularly with regard to infrastructure on motorways and roads, the use of utility networks and the planning of new residential estates. Collaboration would ensure that co-development is facilitated and that the installation of ducts and other telecoms infrastructure is deployed in an efficient manner. The question of whether high speed broadband in buildings should be considered an essential service under building regulations could be further considered. The discussion did recognise, however, that complexities do exist including issues around private lands, wayleaves and health and safety considerations.

There was praise for the ongoing engagement between the telecoms operators and Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) on identifying suitable sites on the motorway network for the locating of telecoms infrastructure in order to improve mobile coverage, although recognition was given to the fact that road safety must remain the priority focus of the TII and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport when considering the siting of new telecommunications infrastructure.

Access to Infrastructure, including State owned Infrastructure
As the State is the largest asset owner of land and property in the country, telecommunications operators recognise the opportunity of using State assets to house telecommunications infrastructure. Many State bodies, however, do not currently have a statutory commercial mandate, remit or competence to fully exploit this opportunity and many are turning to a management services model in this regard.

The absence of a standardised access policy to State owned infrastructure was highlighted as a major concern. A comprehensive database of State assets which could be accessed by the telecoms industry for locating of infrastructure to improve mobile and broadband services should be developed.

The requirement for a definition for blackspots, consistent with international standards, was raised. Where blackspots are identified, participants were strongly of the view that State assets should be used where available. The issue of blackspots was also discussed in the Network Improvements breakout session.

Industry recognised that Irish Water assets played an important role in providing essential high sites across multiple networks. Irish Water indicated that they were undertaking a review of their asset base which has potential implications for a number of telecommunication providers.

The cost of accessing fibre was raised by a number of participants as acting as a barrier to smaller regional Internet Service Providers.

Theme 2: Network Improvements
Network performance is of fundamental importance to the level and quality of service provided by the operators to consumers. Optimising performance to take account of changing demands, weather conditions, line problems and available relevant data are key factors in ensuring that the ongoing increase in demand on the networks can continue to be met. It is imperative that operators actively manage their networks through constant evaluation and optimisation. Failure to adequately manage networks will often lead to a poor user experience and service complaints to the operator or to ComReg.

This breakout session focussed on issues around optimising fixed and wireless networks to deliver enhanced performance.

Communication/Information between stakeholders
A number of potential new issues were identified, primarily centred round communications and the requirement for the dissemination of information between stakeholders, in particular telecoms operators and local authorities.

There was general agreement that there needs to be a greater flow of information from telecoms operators to local authorities in relation to updated location specific information on coverage and network improvements. The establishment of information sharing mechanisms is crucial to bringing about tangible results in identifying solutions to issues impacting on mobile phone and broadband.

In tandem with this, operators require access to detailed infrastructure maps (e.g. of available lighting poles, ducts, etc.) which the local authorities hold. It is imperative that good communication between operators and the local authorities exists including an awareness of all available information. In fact, it should be noted that at the Planning and Licensing session, local authorities asked if telcos could provide them with a network map on their infrastructure. Information sharing was a key theme which emerged across the day.

The long-standing issue of the conflict between lack of coverage in some areas and local resistance to mobile base station masts was raised. With regard to health concerns around masts, regular testing is conducted by ComReg to ensure results are in line with safety standards set by the World Health Organisation. It was suggested that an important element in this debate was the provision of information to and dialogue with those who have concerns about such developments.

This is very pertinent in any discussion around measures to address mobile coverage blackspots. The importance of communicating the need for optimal mast location in order to improve mobile phone coverage was highlighted. The placement of infrastructure, including masts, will play an important role in addressing blackspot locations. While progress on some elements related to this issue has been made, next steps will be explored and will feed into the annual review process, and will potentially form a new action in the work programme of the 2018 Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce.

Role of the Broadband Officer
The Broadband Officers were recognised as playing an important role in terms of acting as an initial contact point for information requests from telecoms operators, in addition to a wider communications role in respect of engaging with the local community in providing updates for the locality and alleviating possible concerns regarding the installation of masts and infrastructure that is required to enhance mobile and broadband services. The role of the Broadband Officer was also discussed in great detail in the Consumer Breakout Session and further recommendations around this role in the future were raised for consideration. See Theme 3 below.

Dual Purpose Infrastructure

Another matter discussed and raised for further consideration was around the feasibility of local authorities installing dual purpose infrastructure (e.g. CCTV masts, public lighting poles) to facilitate installation of telecommunications infrastructure.

Exempted Development Regulations

There was a view expressed that there was a need for a more principle based exemptions approach to be in place to keep pace with technological changes. The issue of exemptions was also raised at the Consumer and Planning and Licensing sessions, which similarly called for more regular reviews to be made to the relevant Regulations.

Theme 3: Consumer Issues

The quality of broadband and mobile phone services vary considerably according to location and type of connection. It is important that consumers are fully aware of the factors that potentially may impact on service quality in their area. Equipping consumers with the right information is an important means of helping them choose the right device and/or provider to maximise the quality of the services that they are paying for.

This breakout session discussed ways to equip consumers with the right information to help them choose the right device and/or provider to maximise the quality of the services for which they are paying, as well as ensuring consumers are aware of their rights.

Complaints Handling

In relation to complaints handling, data should be monitored and reviewed on a continuous basis to inform operators on the main issues being experienced by consumers, and to enable them to communicate solutions and upgrades to address reported issues.

Planning Exemptions

Future proofing of Planning Exemptions to keep pace with technological advances was raised as a matter of concern. Regular reviewing of the Exemptions is required to ensure they remain valid and stay abreast of network developments and consumer demand. This issue was also discussed at the Network Improvement and Planning and Licensing breakout sessions.

Coverage issues

From a consumer perspective a common issue raised is that of inadequate mobile phone signal. Many customers are unaware of whether alternative service providers could offer better coverage in their own locality, and in this regard the national coverage map being developed by ComReg will be hugely beneficial.

Another matter of concern for consumers was the poor quality of indoor phone coverage. The work that ComReg is currently undertaking on researching the feasibility of a licensing or

licensing exemption scheme for mobile phone repeaters will be of significant interest to consumers.

The main suggested new actions were centred round exploring methods to best communicate to consumers the results of the handset testing being currently undertaken by ComReg, the availability of the composite national coverage map when finalised and also providing updates to raise consumer awareness on new technologies as they become available.

Broadband Officers

Response to the appointment of a Broadband Officer as the dedicated point of contact for engagement with telecommunications operatives in their own local authority was strongly welcomed, as was the case in the other breakout sessions. There were calls for the development of structures to support the Broadband Officers. While each local authority area has committed an individual to the position, some are dual jobbing and do not have supporting resources at their disposal. Given the role has expanded significantly since its introduction within the last 12 months, there may be a requirement to review and assess whether the role should be made a full-time position. In addition, a clear common definition of the scope of the role in order to ensure consistency across local authority areas is required. The role of the Broadband Officer was also discussed at the Network Improvement session.

Theme 4: Planning and Licensing

Telecommunications infrastructure must be correctly sited in order for quality mobile and broadband services to be provided to consumers. The erection of equipment, such as masts and antennae, or access to or laying of ducts is essential to the delivery of such services. Erecting equipment or opening roads to access or lay ducts can require development consent or permission in the form of planning permissions or roadworks licences. Timely decision making is also important in the delivery of telecommunications infrastructure.

This breakout session discussed issues relating to the planning process, at a national and local level, which are encountered in the deployment of telecommunications infrastructure.

Infrastructure on Roadways

In respect of the use of the "Guidance on Potential Location of Overground Telecommunications Infrastructure on Public Roadways" (Green Book), it was noted that strong engagement is taking place between Transport Infrastructure Ireland and industry. This was welcomed and mirrored the sentiments expressed at the Access to Infrastructure breakout session.

Development Contributions

On the topic of Development Contribution Schemes, it was noted that 28 of the 31 local authorities are now applying the 2013 Guideline, with a remaining 3 seeking to review their schemes. There was unanimous agreement from participants that waivers should include

mobile as well as broadband infrastructure and that the text of the guidelines should be clearer, reviewed and updated where necessary.

Retention licences for mobile phone masts was discussed, some confusion exists in relation to where additional elements are added, over and above original drawings and whether these are exempt or subject to a Development Contribution Charge being incurred.

Exempted Development Regulations
Industry welcomed the positive discussions which have taken place to date around the Revised Exempted Development Regulations. Telecoms operators expressed the view that more regular reviews of the Regulations would be desirable in order to reflect technological changes. This suggested action will be brought forward to the Taskforce Implementation Group for inclusion in the 2018 Work Programme. The issue of exemptions was also raised at both the Consumer and Network Improvement sessions, underlining the importance of this issue to stakeholders.

Planning Processes
With regard to the planning process, the need for consistency of approach and efficient timelines for decisions on applications was highlighted as the key elements in streamlining the process. Predictability is key to making business cases for investment. The application and interpretation of Section 254[1] across local authority areas appears to be inconsistent. The inclusion of a new action for 2018 on clearly defining and standardising the application approach was suggested. There was a welcome from industry for the fact that statutory planning guidelines of 1996 are earmarked for revision in 2018, given that typical masts and antennae have changed considerably in that period.

Regional Action Groups
The Regional Action Groups were recognised as being beneficial for raising awareness of issues and for the Broadband Officers to communicate about and problem solve specific matters as they emerge. It was suggested that telecoms operators could organise their own structures in a way that will led to better engagement with the Broadband Officers.

Need for "joined up thinking"
On a local level, this session identified that efficiencies in rolling out infrastructure should be explored, with particular thought being given to examining cross sectoral collaboration for any road opening or infrastructure investment. The Dungarvan cycleway was cited as a recent successful example of a joined-up approach which incorporated telecoms infrastructure. The theme of exploring a joined up approach mirrored the discussion in the breakout session on Access to Infrastructure. In order to gain efficiencies, local authorities asked if telcos could provide them with a network map on their infrastructure. Notably, at the Network Improvement session, operators asked local authorities to provide them with information on infrastructure such as lighting poles and ducts. The need to work collaboratively and to explore the scope for a more joined up approach was a recurring theme across the day.

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[1] Section 254 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000

Next Steps

The Taskforce Implementation Group is tasked with carrying out a comprehensive review of progress made after 12 months and is also mandated to recommend further actions that will result in improved service for consumers.

Continued engagement by all action holders will contribute greatly to implementing tangible actions to remove barriers to the deployment of high quality telecommunications networks across this country. The Taskforce Implementation Group will examine concerns regarding existing barriers to determine whether the measures already identified are working to resolve them or if new actions are required to be included in the work programme for 2018.

A number of suggested new actions are emerging for consideration by the Taskforce Implementation Group on foot of the outputs of the thematic breakout sessions, and in light of discussion on the extent of the effectiveness of the Taskforce actions already identified. These actions are centred round the potential for developing policies, legislative matters, raising consumer awareness and improving communications streams.

Examples of the suggested new actions include: the standardising of the approach to an application of Section 254 licenses; development of a comprehensive database of and policy around accessing State owned infrastructure; ongoing revision of the Purple Book and the Green Book; further work on addressing mobile coverage blackspots; and development of communications streams for wider dissemination of information to consumers and to facilitate information sharing between stakeholders.

These items will be highlighted in the Implementation Group's Annual Report 2017 and considered for inclusion in the 2018 Work Programme of the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce.