

The Regional Group Costings

Department for Communications, Climate Action and Environment

- Provide front loading for the National Broadband Plan and re-establish the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce to ensure that it is completed ahead of the current profiled timelines

RESPONSE:

1. National Broadband Plan

The Programme for Government commits to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan. The Department is currently engaging with National Broadband Ireland (NBI) to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of the NBP rollout to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the current plan to an earlier date. Any change requires detailed technical, commercial and financial analysis.

The Department and NBI have agreed to accelerate the rollout of high speed broadband to 679 primary schools across the State by the end of 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026, ensuring that by that time all schools across the State will have the necessary infrastructure to carry out their critical day to day educational activities unimpeded by poor broadband.

NBI has now established a dedicated team to investigate acceleration of the fibre network rollout from its current contracted schedule of seven years. Substantial work has been completed by this team to date, with further actions scheduled over coming months.

Exploring the potential to accelerate the network rollout is being undertaken in parallel with the measures required to mitigate delays arising as a result of Covid-19. The primary focus must be on addressing the delays which have arisen and ensure that the NBI build programme gets back on track and is building momentum month on month.

It is not possible at this point to indicate if an additional cost will arise as a result of accelerating the network rollout or on the number of premises that may benefit from this potential change arising from this analysis, other than to say that it will be those premises currently scheduled for the latter end of the rollout that are the focus of the analysis. As previously indicated, the maximum possible cost to the State will be €2.7 Billion over 25 years and it is not envisaged at this stage that an additional cost will arise as a result of any agreed acceleration of the network rollout.

2. Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce

Since its establishment in 2016, the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce has worked on removing structural barriers to telecommunications deployment and on addressing mobile coverage deficits, particularly in rural areas. Following completion of the 2019 Work Programme, work conducted in 2020 included preparation of a review report on the Taskforce's achievements in helping to remove such obstacles, and consideration of the more strategic issues which will need to be prioritised to address remaining barriers, in order to inform an updated work programme. Drawing upon the well-established spirit of collaboration developed by the Taskforce, constructive liaison between various stakeholders was maintained throughout 2020 by both DECC and the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), in order to ensure industry could both continue to expand networks and to maintain resilient networks as demanded by the onset of COVID restrictions.

In discussions with all relevant stakeholders, the new Work Programme currently under development will harness, and improve upon, the positive spirit of engagement and robust collaborative structures of the Taskforce, to build on the solid progress made since 2016 in addressing deficits in mobile and broadband telecommunications. The Taskforce is expected to next meet in November.

Department of Transport

- Develop and implement a national rural public transport plan with the expansion of Local Link. Double funding over the next four years.

RESPONSE:

The Minister for Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport.

It is the National Transport Authority (NTA) which has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally. The NTA also has national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including management of the Rural Transport Programme which operates under the Local Link brand.

Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan

- The NTA is developing its Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan, which has the objective of providing better connections between villages and towns through enhanced and new local routes.

- These local routes will be integrated with an enhanced regional network connecting cities and regional centres nationwide
- Connecting Ireland is being developed by identifying and measuring the extent of gaps in connectivity between settlements, outside of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford; and also through developing a set of proposals to address those gaps, by enhancing existing services and introducing new ones.
- As these will be mainstream public transport services, they will open to all and all vehicles will be wheelchair accessible.
- The NTA will shortly be undertaking a public consultation on the proposals emanating from Connecting Ireland.
- Following that consultation, the NTA will finalise its proposals which will be submitted to the Department.

Increased funding for Local Link services

- The total allocation in 2021 to the Rural Transport Programme (RTP), which now operates under the "Local Link" brand, is €28.206 million. This includes €11.8 million for rural regular services funded from Public Service Obligation (PSO) funding.
- This is the confirmed RTP allocation for this year, and any percentage increases over whatever timeframe, using whatever basis, may be calculated from it.