

How high-speed broadband will Ireland's economic recovery

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources Eamon Ryan TD talks about the Government's commitment to the economy and society and how it will help Ireland's financial recovery

IRELAND'S economic recovery will be determined by our ability, as a smaller nation, to compete, to attract inward investment and to innovate.

Historically, our international reputation has focused on our attributes as a nation of communicators, with a young, highly skilled and educated workforce. This reputation has been the guarantor of our past successes, attracting high-end manufacturing and telecommunications companies. Undoubtedly, it will help garner our successes of the future.

We cannot, however, rely solely on the marker of our past successes. A more open, flexible approach will be crucial in our future endeavours.

With the scale of social and economic change under way, countries that adapt to lead in digital, clean technologies are those that will have the competitive advantage.

The Government recognises this, delivering a new policy framework designed to maintain Ireland as a centre for international investment. Making a strategic change of direction will secure new employment and enterprise opportunities for Ireland in the years to come.

The opportunities are real. A new digital policy will equip Ireland to buck the trend and return to a climate of economic growth. It must be all-encompassing. With broadband at its core, it must focus on the use of new technologies, transforming our energy, services and the way we do business.

The publication, last year, of the Government's policy paper *Building a Smart Economy* demonstrates our commitment to the development of a digitalised economy and society. With a new policy direction, we're creating a foothold for

Ireland in this burgeoning digital era.

Real progress
If one were to 'set the scene' in Ireland's broadband sector in the past decade, it would be against a backdrop of relative underinvestment. While we led our international competitors in terms of multinational investment in the communications sector, it is just six short years since broadband rollout began.

Bearing that in mind, progress to date has been continuous and rapid. With increases in mobile and cable subscribers in particular, Ireland had 1.2 million subscribers at the beginning of the year. This figure is likely to have risen considerably in the meantime. Recently, the Economist Intelligence Unit ranked us among the top 20 countries worldwide for e-readiness.

Over 60pc of our homes and an estimated 90pc of our businesses have a broadband connection. Consumer choice is increasing, higher speeds are being delivered and prices are being lowered.

We are making progress, but we have further ambitions.

Faster, cheaper broadband
Over the past two years, our focus on broadband has been primarily in the area of availability.

With around €220m of investment (including almost €80m government funding), the National Broadband Scheme will deliver broadband services to those people throughout the country who were previously without access. The European Union recently made funding available for a rural broadband programme. This scheme will complement our existing broadband initiatives, such as the metropolitan area networks (MANs), to ensure that all premises in



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Ireland will be served by a broadband service provider.

Basic speeds won't suffice forever. For this reason, we're developing our networks to provide the appropriate services to those who need them - our homes, schools and businesses.

Work is well progressed on Project Kelvin, which will provide an additional link between Ireland and the US via a high-speed fibre-optic cable. The cables came ashore in Portrush last June, and are being brought through the border counties, finally linking to Dublin.

By this time next year,

connections between Irish businesses and their US customers will be enhanced and the north-west of the country will be highly attractive as a centre for foreign direct investment, particularly for high-tech industries. On a broader basis, it will have the effect of further lowering our broadband prices nationally.

We are consulting with various departments and agencies on other projects that are crucial to our digital future. The 'one-stop shop' concept will open up state-owned fibre infrastructure, which, we all agree, is critical to the

development of next-generation broadband services. My department has been examining various models, consulting with industry, state bodies and agencies. I will shortly introduce legal provisions on access to road ducting into the Dáil.

We're delivering 100Mbps of high-speed connectivity to our schools this year, creating new opportunities in education and enabling a new type of learning in Irish schools. A pilot project, which will deliver these speeds to second-level schools in every county, is under way and it's my intention to extend this availability to all post-primary

schools in the near future.

By making this very significant investment, the Government is showing its commitment to current and future generations of schoolchildren and is ensuring that Ireland has the capacity to become a knowledge-based economy.

We're bringing broadband to the home, in a policy whereby each new build in the country will have fibre ducting installed as a matter of course. Along with the Department of the Environment, standards for open-access ducting are being developed

Next-generation broadband
With the policy in place under way, we address the market.

I'm well aware of that the business case for investment must be strong. Even where demand for high-speed services is not at its maximum, it's imperative that we put development of high networks, so as to place at the forefront of the digital economy.

Collaboration can play a major role in future progress. The industry, through the Telecoms Internet Federation (TIF), is open to exploring possibilities for collaboration. Such willingness under my own policy, which I see as much collaboration as possible to maximise efficiencies without impacting on competition. I look forward to establishing the Broadband Task Force, which, with participation from industry and ComReg, will fast-track progress in this and other relevant areas.

In changing economic circumstances, the complementary role of both the public and private sectors is key.

The Government is committed, and is making necessary investments to improve Ireland's broadband infrastructure.

Our MANs are being developed to facilitate next-generation mobile access. We've entered into new collaborations with partners, such as Vodafone and eNet, and BT and O2 and Vodafone, to deliver increased bandwidth in new and innovative ways to customers. Many of these are increasing the speed at no extra cost. It's delivering National Broadband Scheme to towns and villages across the country. Collaborative