



Media Release- 19 January 2005

ComReg and Ofcom publish first report on cross-border telecoms issues

The Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) and Northern Ireland's Communications Regulator (Ofcom) today published the first report of their Joint Working Group on cross-border telecoms issues.

The Joint Working Group (JWG) was set up in April 2004 in order to explore solutions to problems that affect telecommunications users in both in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. These include mobile phone roaming charges, data transfer, numbering, illegal radio broadcasting, and the potential for joint provision of all-island spectrum licences.

In writing this report, the Group has reviewed existing research and commissioned new studies, both at the consumer and technical level, to establish the extent of inadvertent roaming and its effects on users. Furthermore, members of the Group have met representatives of the major telecoms companies operating in the two parts of the island. The group also met a number of public representatives and business organisations in the course of its work.

The issue of inadvertent roaming – where mobile phone users connect to a base station in the Northern Ireland while in the Republic of Ireland and vice versa – has been a concern for many groups, including public representatives, consumer and business organisations, as well as individual consumers. International mobile phone roaming charges are significantly more expensive than charges for calls made via base stations within the consumer's home country.

Research conducted for the Joint Working Group on Mobile Roaming suggests that

- Inadvertent roaming is a feature on all networks on both sides of the border. Manual selection of a home network can prevent inadvertent roaming.
- Some of the operators have all-island tariff options in place for their post-pay subscribers. However the JWG noted that none of the operators has any all-island arrangements in place for pre-paid customers - the largest customer segment in the Republic of Ireland and the UK
- Pre-pay mobile phone users in Northern Ireland could be paying up to six times the charges incurred by customers on a contract when roaming.
- More than two-fifths (43%) of Northern Ireland mobile phone customers surveyed have been connected to a cross-border base station while still in Northern Ireland, of whom one-third have then made a call which incurred international roaming charges.

- 90% of Northern Ireland consumers surveyed were unable to recall being provided with advice about the issue of inadvertent mobile roaming.

On the wider issue of international roaming, which has been identified by Regulators throughout Europe and the European Commission as a significant issue to be addressed, ComReg and Ofcom are actively working with other members of the European Regulators Group on this important issue.

The Joint Working Group also assessed the issue of cross-border data transfer in fixed telecoms markets. Recent initiatives by both Governments have begun to improve the level of infrastructure and services and to address the lack of resilience of the telecommunications infrastructure in border areas. This can lead to greater diversity of supply and more competition in this area.

ComReg Chairperson, Isolde Goggin said: “It is imperative that both Regulators work together to find solutions that will contribute to resolving the long-standing cross-border telecoms issues raised in this report.”

Ofcom’s Northern Ireland Director, Denis Wolinski said: “Our research demonstrates that consumer concern about inadvertent roaming between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is based on evidence. We are keen to work with the industry to explore possible solutions.”

The full report of the Joint Working Group can be found online at www.comreg.ie

Ends

Notes to editors

ComReg is the statutory body responsible for the regulation of the electronic communications sector (telecommunications, radiocommunications and broadcasting transmission) and the postal sector in the Republic of Ireland. For further details please visit www.comreg.ie

Ofcom is the independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industries, with responsibilities across television, radio, telecommunications and wireless communications services. For further details please visit www.ofcom.org.uk

The announcement of the setting up of the Joint Working Group can be found at:
http://www.ofcom.org.uk/media_office/latest_news/nr1_20040517
<http://www.comreg.ie/publications/default.asp?ctype=5&nid=101637>

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