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## **Universal Service regime to benefit Irish Telecommunications Users**

The Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) today issued its Response to Consultation on the future telecommunications Universal Service framework.

The Universal Service framework ensures that the provision of services such as telephone lines, payphones and directory services can continue to evolve in line with changing user needs, market developments and recent changes in the EU regulatory framework. The new EU directives will come into effect from the 25<sup>th</sup> of July.

The concept of the Universal Service Framework means every person can expect that reasonable requests will be met, for a basic set of high quality telecommunications services no matter where they live, at an affordable price.

Given eircom's market share, its network presence throughout the country and its considerable experience and ability in providing universal services, ComReg has signalled its intention to re-designate eircom as the universal service provider (USP). ComReg did consider whether a mobile operator could be designated as USP, but concluded that this is not currently feasible due to affordability and technical considerations.

The Commission will be seeking the consent of the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, Dermot Ahern TD, on relevant aspects of the scope of the universal service obligations (USO). Once this process is completed, ComReg will propose to formally designate eircom as the universal service provider (USP).

This would then require eircom to develop a policy statement/customer charter regarding the provision of all services that fall within the scope of the USO. Among the obligations this would cover, are:

***Provision of Telephone Installations*** - eircom will be required to meet all reasonable requests for telephone lines to locations throughout the State. In doing this, they will have to develop specific criteria and associated terms and conditions governing the reasonableness of any user request for the installation of a telephone line including a procedure for resolving any disputes where they arise. They will also be required to develop and publish a statement which sets out the range of factors which can affect its network performance and therefore the internet speeds experienced by users via their telephone connection.

***Provision of Directory Enquiry Services and Phone Book*** - eircom will be required to provide users with a printed phone book free of charge and to offer directory enquiry services throughout the State. A CD format of the directory is also to be developed, the price of which will be agreed with ComReg.

***Public Pay Telephones*** - eircom will be required to provide payphones throughout the State to meet the reasonable needs of users and, subject to any guidelines that are agreed with ComReg, shall not remove any single site payphones. To increase the level of transparency for payphone users, eircom will publish an annual statement on its payphone strategy, including specific procedures for the removal/re-siting of payphones - including consultation with the local community - and a process for resolving any disputes which may arise. Eircom will also have to regularly publish information on changes in its payphone base.

***Provision of Services to Disabled Users*** - eircom will be required to offer particular services to ensure that disabled users have access to universal services. They will be required to develop and publish a Code of Practice governing the provision of services to disabled users. ComReg will also be discussing with the USP – eircom - other means of improving the accessibility of services for disabled users.

Commenting on the Universal Service Framework, Eoin Doyle, Chairperson of ComReg said “This updated regime outlined in the paper will provide an important safeguard for users while competition continues to develop. Apart from providing greater clarity around eircom’s specific obligations, it will result in increased transparency for consumers seeking access to these essential services. I am confident that the approach taken by ComReg will ensure that users become more aware of their telecommunication service entitlements and strengthen their position in their dealings with the universal service provider. ComReg looks forward to finalising the scope of the USP following consultation with the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources.”

**ENDS**

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**Note for Editors:**

**Universal Service Obligations (USO):** The European Regulatory Framework provides that Member States must ensure that users have access to a basic set of telecommunications services, no matter where they live, at an affordable price. This is to be achieved through the imposition of specific obligations (“Universal Service Obligations”) governing the provision of telephone lines, directory services, public payphones and measures to ensure disabled users have access to these services. Under the current and proposed national framework ComReg is responsible for deciding on the scope of these obligations.

**Universal Service Provider (USP):** The European Regulatory Framework provides that Member States can designate one or more operators to meet these obligations. A designated operator is known as a Universal Service Provider or “USP”. Under the current and proposed national framework ComReg is responsible for designating the Universal Service Provider.