



Commission for
Communications Regulation

Information Notice

Update on the Availability of Ireland's "Digital Dividend" and the 900 MHz Band Liberalisation Consultation Process

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1 Foreword

Radio spectrum is a valuable and finite State resource which plays an increasingly important role in delivering communications services to consumers and driving cross-platform competition in Ireland. New and improved wireless and mobile services are constantly being developed and access to radio spectrum promotes such innovation to the benefit of users, operators and the State generally.

Compared to many other countries in Europe, Ireland relies heavily on radio spectrum to provide services to consumers. For example, over 600,000 broadband internet subscriptions, or 40% of Ireland's broadband usage, are provided via mobile and wireless products. In addition, the number of mobile phone subscriptions in Ireland is now in excess of 4.8 million and this represents a mobile penetration rate of 108%¹.

Access to radio spectrum to support such services is important to their continuing development, and, in this regard, ComReg welcomes today's clarification by the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources that analogue terrestrial television will be switched-off in Quarter 4 of 2012, in conjunction with switch over in Northern Ireland and that commercial digital terrestrial television (DTT) will not now require access to the band 790 to 862 MHz ("the 800 MHz band"). The switch-off of the analogue service, following its replacement by DTT, will release valuable radio spectrum that can be used for new and innovative electronic communications services and additional/enhanced television services. This freeing up of frequencies as a result of more efficient spectrum-use through the switchover from analogue to DTT is commonly referred to as the "Digital Dividend".

The release of the Digital Dividend in Ireland represents a unique opportunity to develop and utilise new and innovative forms of broadcasting and communications services for the benefit of users. The 800 MHz band has very favourable propagation characteristics which facilitate the provision of both wide-area and in-building coverage and the quantum of spectrum that now appears capable of release would be sufficient to facilitate the provision of high-bandwidth services to users.

ComReg is currently consulting on the liberalisation of the use of spectrum in the 900 MHz band and today's announcement by the Minister about the availability and release of Ireland's Digital Dividend would appear to be of significant relevance to this process. ComReg is therefore issuing this Information Notice to update and inform stakeholders and interested parties on developments in respect of the release of the Digital Dividend in Ireland and to draw attention to ComReg's intentions in relation to the 900 MHz liberalisation process.

**John Doherty,
Commissioner**

¹ ComReg document 10/43 – "Quarterly Key Data Report" – published 17 June 2010.

2 Information Notice

2.1 Background

On Thursday 29 July 2010, the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (“the Minister”), announced that analogue terrestrial television will be switched-off in the State in Quarter 4 of 2012, in conjunction with analogue switchover in Northern Ireland.

As it provides clarity on the DTT process in Ireland and the corresponding switch-off of analogue terrestrial television services, this announcement is of significance in many respects. The switch-off of analogue terrestrial services will release valuable radio spectrum that can be used for new and innovative electronic communications services and additional/enhanced television services. This freeing up of frequencies as a result of more efficient spectrum-use through the switchover from analogue to DTT is commonly known as the “Digital Dividend.”

Given the significance of this announcement, ComReg has decided to issue this Information Notice to provide an update and information to stakeholders and interested parties on the expected availability and release of Digital Dividend spectrum and, in particular, the 790-862 MHz band (“the 800 MHz band”), which is a spectrum band subject to an EU-wide harmonised approach in relation to technical conditions for terrestrial systems capable of providing electronic communications services. This information notice also outlines the envisaged next steps in relation to the 900 MHz liberalisation process, in light of the Minister’s announcement.

2.2 The 800 MHz band

The Digital Dividend represents a once in a generation opportunity to re-organise and release this spectrum band. ComReg has conducted a consultation² on the Digital Dividend and ComReg’s response to this consultation³ sets out a number of high level principles relating to the release of Digital Dividend spectrum.

As a consequence of the Minister’s announcement and as commercial DTT will not require access to the 800 MHz band, ComReg now has considerably greater clarity and information on the availability of spectrum in the 800 MHz band in Ireland.

This is significant as ComReg is now able to plan, within a defined timeframe, for the release of the 800 MHz band. Given the substantial benefits that can accrue from the use of this spectrum and given that this spectrum is now expected to become available for use in early 2013, and given, amongst other things, the comparable propagation characteristics of the 800 MHz and 900 MHz spectrum bands ComReg believes that it may be appropriate to consider the release and assignment of rights of use of spectrum

² ComReg document 09/15 – “Consultation: Digital Dividend in Ireland” - published 12 March 2009

³ ComReg document 09/81 - “Response to Consultation: Digital Dividend in Ireland” – published 20 October 2009.

in the 800 MHz band in conjunction with the liberalisation and assignment of rights of use of spectrum in the 900 MHz band.

ComReg will now give consideration to the most appropriate process by which to release and assign rights of use of spectrum in both the 800 MHz and 900 MHz bands.

2.3 Liberalisation and Assignment of Rights of use of Spectrum in 900 MHz band – timing and transitional arrangements

In light of the expiry of two of the three GSM 900 MHz licences in May 2011 and the expected availability of 800 MHz spectrum in early 2013, ComReg notes there are a number of issues that would need to be addressed in facilitating any joint release of, and assignment of rights of use in, these spectrum bands.

Whilst it is now ComReg's intention in principle to hold a competition for the award of 800 MHz and 900 MHz spectrum in advance of the expiry of these GSM 900 MHz licences, it notes that arrangements would be required to deal with timing issues and ensuring an orderly transition to the new circumstances arising from such a competition. In particular, ComReg envisages the need for arrangements to address the interim issues that would arise in the period between the expiry in May 2011 of two of the existing GSM 900 MHz licences and the commencement of new licences in these bands, as well as the need for arrangements that would allow all successful licensees in these bands to plan their networks and install equipment during this transitional period.

2.4 Next steps

ComReg will set out proposals for the inclusion of the 800 MHz band in the process, including interim and transitional arrangements, consulting as necessary in due course.