

From the Office of the Minister



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and Investment**

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Mr Joe Byrne MLA
Room 322
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26 May 2015

Dear Mr Byrne

During question time on the 11 May 2015 the former DETI Minister agreed to share with you a comprehensive update on mobile coverage.

I think it worth stating that telecommunications policy is a reserved matter with direction provided by the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The telecommunications market in Northern Ireland, as in other regions of the UK, is also fully privatised and independently regulated by Ofcom. DETI has only limited powers to intervene in relation to telecommunications infrastructure and services and is subject to European law on competition and state aid.

With regard to mobile coverage, obligations are established through licences issued by Ofcom and it is they who are directly responsible for monitoring mobile coverage and performance of the Mobile Network Operators (MNOs). In that context, while my Department has regular contact with the MNOs, its influence is therefore limited.

I am aware that the MNOs have been investing quite significantly in their 2G and 3G networks in recent years as well as commencing the roll-out of their 4G infrastructure. This has impacted positively in Northern Ireland, with Ofcom recently reporting that, at June 2014, only 1% of premises in Northern Ireland were in a complete 2G or 3G not-spot - this is on a par with other parts of the UK. With regard to 4G coverage, Northern Ireland fared better than other UK nations with 21% of premises having no outdoor coverage from any operator when compared to 25% in England, 44% in Scotland and 56% in Wales.

Looking specifically at areas of West Tyrone, Ofcom figures show that 2G coverage for the Strabane area currently stands at 95.1% from at least one operator. For 3G the figure is 88.8%. For the Omagh area the equivalent figures are 96.2% and 86.1% respectively.

It is understood that MNO investment is set to continue until 2017 and that by completion coverage by all operators, across all technology platforms will, in percentage terms, range from the mid to high nineties.

Despite the market-led investments, everyone fully recognises that there are areas that still struggle with coverage and for that reason the UK Government is implementing the £150m Mobile Infrastructure Project (MIP). This project, which is scheduled to end on 31 March 2016, seeks to address complete 2G (voice and text) not-spots. However, it is expected the mobile operators, all of which are participating in the initiative, will take the opportunity to future-proof mast sites by installing equipment that can provide 3G, 4G services and beyond. Around 70 provisional mast sites have been identified across Northern Ireland, including a significant number in West Tyrone.

In December 2014 the UK Government announced an agreement that will see the mobile operators invest some £5bn in network infrastructure improvements by 2017 with a view to addressing partial not-spots i.e. those areas where coverage is provided by just one or two of the four MNOs.

This is welcome news for Northern Ireland where 9% of premises are in outdoor 2G partial not-spots, 37% are in outdoor 3G partial not-spots, and 100% are in outdoor 4G partial not-spots.

I will arrange for a copy of the letter to be sent to the Speaker's Office and that a copy will be placed in the Assembly Library.



JONATHAN BELL MLA
Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment