

TELECOMS AND MEDIA

Ireland



Telecoms and Media

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Quick reference guide enabling side-by-side comparison of local insights into local regulatory framework, foreign ownership restrictions and licensing requirements; spectrum use considerations; ex ante regulatory obligations; structural / functional separation considerations; universal service obligations; number allocation and portability; customer terms and conditions; net neutrality; platform regulation; next-generation access (NGA) networks; data protection and cybersecurity issues; big data; local storage requirements; foreign programmes and local content requirements; advertising; must-carry obligations; regulation of new media content; digital switchover; media plurality; regulatory agencies, competition law, and appeals; and recent trends.

Generated 27 June 2022

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COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Regulatory and institutional structure

Summarise the regulatory framework for the communications sector. Do any foreign ownership restrictions apply to communications services?

The Department of Environment, Climate Action and Communications (DECC) is the relevant governmental department responsible for the telecoms sector and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media is responsible for the media sector. The telecommunications regulator is the Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg).

Ireland has implemented the EU regulatory framework governing the electronic communications sector by way of primary and secondary legislation. Primary legislation consists of the Communications Regulation Acts 2002–2016. Secondary legislation currently consists of regulations that transpose the EU framework, namely:

- the European Communities (Electronic Communications Networks and Services) (Framework) Regulations 2011 (SI 333/2011);
- the European Communities (Electronic Communications Networks and Services) (Access) Regulations 2011 (SI 334/2011) (the Access Regulations);
- the European Communities (Electronic Communications Networks and Services) (Authorisation) Regulations 2011 (SI 335/2011) (the Authorisation Regulations);
- the European Communities (Electronic Communications Networks and Services) (Universal Service and User's Rights) Regulations 2011 (SI 337/2011) (the Universal Service Regulations); and
- the European Communities (Electronic Communications Networks and Services) (Privacy and Electronic Communications) Regulations 2011 (SI 336/2011) (the Privacy Regulations).

Following a review of the regulatory framework for electronic communications, the directive establishing the European Electronic Communications Code (EECC) (namely, Directive 2018/1972) entered into force in December 2018. The EECC revises the entire legislative framework for the electronic communications sector in Europe and aims to codify all existing EU telecoms regulatory regimes into one legal instrument. Ireland missed the deadline for implementation of 21 December 2020, and in April 2022, was subsequently referred to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) over its failure to fully transpose and communicate to the European Commission how national measures transpose the EECC.

However, following informal stakeholder consultation over the past two years, on 22 December 2021, the DECC published draft legislation intended to transpose the EECC using two legislative instruments:

- the Communications Regulation (Enforcement) Bill 2022 (the Bill); and
- the European Union (Electronic Communications Code) Regulations 2022 (the Regulations).

Specifically, a summary of the Bill and a full version of the Regulations were published in draft and the public was invited to comment on the draft Regulations only, by 11 February 2022. Enactment of both legal instruments is expected before the fourth quarter of 2022.

No foreign ownership restrictions apply to communications services at this time, although Ireland is expected to adopt implementing legislation giving effect to the EU Foreign Direct Investment Screening Regulation in 2022. The Investment Screening Bill, which proposes to give effect to such a domestic screening regime, is deemed to be priority

legislation as part of the Irish government's 2022 Spring Legislative Programme, with pre-legislative scrutiny being waived to expedite transposition. However, the scope of Irish rules in respect of any prospective foreign ownership restrictions is not yet clear.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Authorisation/licensing regime

Describe the authorisation or licensing regime.

The provision of communications services is currently subject to the regime set out in the Authorisation Regulations, which confers a general right to provide an electronic communications network (ECN) or an electronic communications service (ECS) (or both) provided certain conditions are complied with. No distinction is made as to the type of network or service (eg, mobile, fixed (including public Wi-Fi) or satellite).

The notification procedure for obtaining a general authorisation can be completed on the ComReg online portal (Electronic Register of Authorised Undertaking (ERAU)). Operators are free to commence operations once a properly and fully completed notification has been received by ComReg. It is envisaged that ComReg will assess all notifications, before sending out confirmation of authorisation within seven working days. Notwithstanding that any registered services will automatically be listed on the ERAU on ComReg's website, a notifying party is, however, immediately subject to the Irish regulatory regime and the conditions set out in the general authorisation. Conditions that may be attached to a general authorisation are set out in the schedule to the Authorisation Regulations. ComReg has also produced a document identifying the conditions of a General Authorisation, which outlines the conditions for the provision of ECN and ECS, before registering with ComReg.

General Authorisations are unlimited in duration. No fee is payable on notification; however, an annual levy (0.2 per cent of relevant turnover) is payable where an operator's relevant turnover (ie, relating to the service or network) in Ireland in the relevant financial year is €500,000 or more.

The EU Framework as transposed also governs the granting of rights of use for numbers and radio spectrum. ComReg revised the numbering conditions of use and application process, amalgamating the Numbering Conventions and conditions of use to simplify the rules.

Fixed and mobile service providers may also need to obtain a licence under the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1926 (as amended) in connection with the use of wireless telegraphy apparatus. Non-compliance with the Wireless Telegraphy Act can be prosecuted by ComReg.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Flexibility in spectrum use

Do spectrum licences generally specify the permitted use or is permitted use (fully or partly) unrestricted? Is licensed spectrum tradable or assignable?

The legal framework controls ComReg's management of the radio frequency spectrum in Ireland. ComReg issues licences on a technology and service-neutral basis (eg, the 'liberalised use' licences issued following a spectrum auction were issued 'to keep and have possession of apparatus for wireless telegraphy for terrestrial systems capable of providing ECSs'). ComReg considers that spectrum trading is a spectrum management tool that, along with other measures, can increase the efficient use of spectrum rights.

However, ComReg may, through licence conditions or otherwise, provide for proportionate and non-discriminatory restrictions to the types of radio network or wireless access technology used for ECS where this is necessary (eg, to

avoid harmful interference and safeguard the efficient use of spectrum, etc).

ComReg has published regulations (the Wireless Telegraphy (Transfer of Spectrum Rights of Use) Regulations 2014 (SI 34/2014)) and guidelines for spectrum trading in the Radio Spectrum Policy Programme (RSPP) bands and is prioritising the setting out of a spectrum leasing framework for the RSPP bands a priority action as part of its Strategy Statement. ComReg has imposed an ex-ante regime for reviewing notified spectrum transfers to determine whether such transfers would distort competition in the market. Where the transfer forms part of a wider transaction that is subject to merger control scrutiny by the Irish Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) or by the European Commission, the framework and guidelines will not apply and the appropriate competition body will be the sole decision-making body. ComReg must be informed of any such merger or acquisition at the same time it is notified to the relevant competition body. The framework and guidelines deal solely with spectrum trading; ComReg has indicated that it will deal with spectrum leasing and sharing or pooling on a case-by-case basis pending further consideration of the same.

ComReg has also published its Framework for Spectrum Leases in Ireland concerning:

- transfer of spectrum regime under the EU Spectrum Transfer Framework and implementing Irish legislation;
- the scope of the proposed Spectrum Lease Framework (noting the difference between a spectrum lease or transfer);
- the procedural framework for spectrum leasing; and
- how ComReg intends to grant and issue a spectrum lease licence.

ComReg published a decision in December 2020 concerning a significant release of spectrum (known as a multi-band spectrum auction) concerning the 700 megahertz (MHz), 1.4 gigahertz (GHz), 2.3GHz and 3.6GHz bands. This decision outlines the award or auction process for the release of licences in these bands and licence conditions for spectrum in these bands (eg, roll-out obligations). This decision was appealed by one operator, Three Ireland, on various grounds and is currently before the Irish courts.

In May 2021, ComReg initiated the application process for the award of multi-band spectrum in respect of the 700MHz duplex, 2.1GHz, 2.3GHz and 2.6GHz bands. In June 2021, ComReg awarded a 2.1GHz Band Liberalised Use Licence to both Three Ireland and Vodafone. ComReg (following consent of the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications) also adopted the following regulations in May of 2021:

- the Wireless Telegraphy (Liberalised use and related Licences in the 700MHz duplex, 2.1GHz, 2.3GHz and 2.6GHz bands) Regulations 2021 (SI 264 of 2021): these regulations are applicable to the grant of new rights of use for the Award Spectrum; and
- the Wireless Telegraphy (Third Generation and GSM Licence (Amendment) and Interim Licensing) Regulations 2021 (SI 265 of 2021): these regulations give effect to ComReg's decisions for the liberalisation of existing 2.1GHz rights of use, and the grant of interim 2.1GHz rights of use to Three Ireland in respect of the Multi Band Spectrum Award.

Given the government measures to address the extraordinary situation presented by the covid-19 pandemic and the increased traffic demands placed on wireless networks arising from the same, since April 2020, ComReg has put in place a number of consecutive licensing frameworks for the temporary assignment of use (the Temporary Frameworks). Each of these licensing frameworks has provided for the temporary assignment of spectrum rights in the 700MHz and 2.6GHz bands for an overall period of up to six calendar months. Following a common letter from three Irish mobile network operators (MNOs) (Three Ireland, eir and Vodafone), on 4 March 2022, ComReg established a fourth further temporary licensing framework for rights of use in the 700MHz duplex and 2.1GHz bands. Such a

framework was made effective via The Wireless Telegraphy (Further Temporary Electronic Communications Services Licences) (No.4) Regulations 2021 (SI 138 of 2022) on 28 March 2022. After assessing each application received from all Irish MNOs, ComReg issued licenses to Meteor (700MHz and 2.1GHz bands), Three Ireland (700MHz), and Vodafone (700MHz) from 2 April 2022 to 1 July 2022.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Ex-ante regulatory obligations

Which communications markets and segments are subject to ex-ante regulation? What remedies may be imposed?

The following communications markets are subject to ex-ante regulation.

Fixed communications

Retail access to the public telephone network at a fixed location

Eir has been designated with significant market power (SMP) in this market and the remedies imposed on eir include access and price control obligations, and an obligation not to unreasonably bundle this service with its other services.

Wholesale call origination on the public telephone network provided at a fixed location

Eir has been designated with SMP in this market and the remedies imposed on eir include access, non-discrimination, transparency, accounting separation, price control and cost accounting.

Wholesale call termination on individual public telephone networks provided at a fixed location

Seven fixed-service providers (eir, BT Communications Ireland Limited, Verizon Ireland Limited, Virgin Media Ireland Limited (formerly UPC Communications Ireland Limited), Colt Telecom Ireland Limited, Smart Telecom Holdings Limited and Magnet Networks Limited) have been designated as having SMP. All operators are subject to price control and cost-accounting obligations, with separate price control and accounting obligations applying to eir.

Wholesale local access (provided at a fixed location)

Eir has been designated with SMP in this market and the remedies imposed on eir include access, transparency, non-discrimination, accounting separation, price control and cost-accounting obligations. On 13 August 2021, eir was deemed to be non-compliant with the obligations imposed on it by the WLA Decision Instrument in that it failed to:

- allow access to exchange chambers and access to ingress/egress points to other network operators; and
- did not allow access to exchange chambers under the same conditions and of the same quality as eir provides to itself, or its subsidiaries, affiliates or partners.

Wholesale central access

Eir has been designated with SMP in the regional wholesale central access (WCA) market (but not the urban WCA in which ComReg considered there was enough competition in this market) and the remedies imposed on eir include access, transparency, non-discrimination, accounting separation, price control and cost-accounting obligations.

Wholesale terminating segments of leased lines

Eir has been designated with SMP in this market and the remedies imposed on eir include access, transparency, non-discrimination, accounting separation, price control and cost-accounting obligations.

Mobile communications

Wholesale voice call termination on individual mobile networks

Six mobile network operators were designated as having SMP in this market (Vodafone, O2 Ireland (acquired by Three Ireland), Meteor, Three Ireland, Tesco Mobile Ireland Limited and Lycamobile Ireland Limited). Remedies imposed on these operators include access, non-discrimination, transparency and price-control obligations.

ComReg took court action against eir seeking to impose significant penalties (about €10 million) over alleged breaches of the Access Regulations by failing to allow access to its network to other telecom providers. In December 2018, eir agreed to pay ComReg €3 million to settle these enforcement proceedings. As part of the settlement deal, eir also consented to allow independent observers to monitor its internal divisions between its wholesale and retail structures.

Non-compliance with requests for information to inform market analysis or to enable ComReg to carry out its statutory function can be prosecuted by ComReg.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Structural or functional separation

Is there a legal basis for requiring structural or functional separation between an operator's network and service activities? Has structural or functional separation been introduced or is it being contemplated?

Structural separation has not been provided for in the Irish communications regulatory framework. Structural separation can be imposed under the Competition Acts 2002–2017 as a remedy in cases entailing an abuse of dominance contrary to section 5 of the Competition Acts 2002–2017.

Functional separation powers do exist as an exceptional remedy in respect of vertically integrated operators with SMP under the regulatory framework, in circumstances where ComReg concludes that:

- transparency, non-discrimination, accounting separation, access and price-control obligations have failed to achieve effective competition; and
- where it has identified important and persisting competition problems or market failures concerning the wholesale provision of certain access markets.

Following a settlement agreement between eir and ComReg, eir is to impose a revised regulatory governance model to separate its retail and wholesale arms (with independent observers monitoring such a separation for a five-year period).

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Universal service obligations and financing

Outline any universal service obligations. How is provision of these services financed?

Eir has been designated as the universal service provider (USP) for telephony services since 2006.

The following points should be noted concerning the universal service obligation (USO):

- eir must satisfy any reasonable request to provide, at a fixed location, connections to the public telephone network and access to a publicly available telephone service (PATS);
- the maintenance of the National Directory Database (NDD) is no longer a USP obligation;
- an accessibility statement being published to ensure equivalence in access and choice for disabled end users is now an obligation of all undertakings and the provision of specialised terminal equipment for disabled end users is no longer an obligation of the USP or any undertaking since 1 January 2016; and
- eir must adhere to the principle of maintaining affordability for universal services.

In December 2018, ComReg decided that PortingXS (a Dutch company) would be responsible for the management and maintenance of the NDD from 1 July 2019, after the expiry of the transition period to allow the transfer of functions from eir. As such, PortingXS must ensure that a comprehensive record exists of all subscribers of publicly available telephone services in the state, excluding those who have refused to have their details included in the NDD. In August 2015, ComReg specified certain requirements to be complied with by all undertakings to ensure equivalence in access and choice for disabled end users (previously, only eir as the USP had obligations in respect of a Code of Practice concerning the provision of services for people with disabilities).

Eir is subject to legally binding performance targets relating to timescales for connection, fault-rate occurrence and fault repair times. ComReg issues quarterly reports detailing eir's performance data covering its legally binding and non-legally binding performance targets.

There is currently no USO fund in Ireland. Eir, as the USP, may apply to receive funding for the net cost (if any) of meeting the USO where ComReg determines there is a net cost and that it represents an unfair burden. There is currently litigation before the Irish courts following ComReg's rejection of eir's application for funding and a reference has been made in May 2020 to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) on certain aspects of this case including the fairness of USO burden on eir.

On 7 April 2017, ComReg published the outcome of its assessment of eir's 2015 compliance with the annual performance targets set out in Performance Improvement Plan 3. Eir submitted a force majeure claim in June 2016 and sought relief in respect of fault repair time performance only. The submission set out the basis for eir's force majeure claim as being the 'exceptional weather events in January, November and December 2015'. Also, eir submitted an expert report on the weather conditions associated with the force majeure claim. In response, ComReg formed the view that it could be considered that force majeure conditions applied in December 2015 but that the January and November 2015 weather events did not constitute force majeure events within the meaning of the Performance Improvement Programme (PIP3). Eir paid ComReg a penalty of €3,094,000 in December 2016 for its failure to meet the PIP3 agreed USO quality of service performance targets for 2015. In light of this, ComReg does not intend to take further enforcement action against eir for the 2015 period. In March 2017, eir initiated High Court proceedings against ComReg concerning fault repair time obligations imposed on eir. In January 2017, ComReg imposed a 48-hour deadline on eir to repair faults in its telecoms lines (pursuant to complaints from eir's competitors).

In June 2017, ComReg applied to the High Court for declarations of non-compliance concerning eir's transparency, non-discrimination and access obligations to provide access to its network to other operators, seeking a financial penalty of up to €10 million (which would be the largest in the state) concerning these regulatory breaches. In December 2017, eir

launched counter proceedings against the Minister claiming the EU telecoms regulations have been wrongly applied in Ireland (Access Regulations) and that ComReg has overstepped its remit in trying to impose civil penalties 'of the kind it is proposing under existing law'. In December 2018, eir agreed to pay €3 million to ComReg to settle these enforcement proceedings. As part of the settlement deal, eir also consented to allow independent observers to monitor its internal divisions between its wholesale and retail structures. In February 2020, ComReg published an update on the progress of the commitments under its settlement agreement with eir. The set of commitments, when fully implemented, will result in the establishment and operation of an enhanced regulatory governance model in eir. Completion of the commitments is underpinned by €9 million held in escrow that is partially released to eir on completion of commitments milestones.

In July 2016, ComReg designated eir as the USP for access at a fixed location (AFL USO) for a period of five years, which designation remained in full force and effect until 30 June 2021. Pursuant to ComReg Decision D05/21, this timeframe was extended to 30 October 2021. Notwithstanding the fact eir appealed to the Irish High Court against ComReg's decision to extend the designated period, On 5 November 2021, ComReg published a decision (21/112) in respect of Universal Service Requirements regarding the Provision of AFL USO. As part of this decision, eir has been designated as the USP of AFL USO in Ireland, from 31 October 2021 until 30 June 2023. In addition to this, the Reasonable Access Request process and threshold has been amended to include, inter alia, the following:

- the new connections and (or) PATS obligation is now amended;
- the initial cost threshold of €1,000 is now removed;
- the automatic USP obligation to supply all reasonable access requests costing under €1,000, irrespective of whether there is an alternative infrastructure and an equivalent service available, is now removed;
- eir now has an obligation to supply reasonable access requests where there is no alternative infrastructure and equivalent service available; and
- the 'equivalent service' definition is now amended to include voice and broadband services supplied in a bundle, providing the bundle meets certain existing criteria, including affordability.

ComReg has further agreed to keep any AFL USO and designation under review, in light of the transposition of the EEC and developments in the market. Eir's litigious appeal regarding the extension of the designated period, by ComReg, remains ongoing.

ComReg will continue to closely monitor eir's USO performance and publishes quarterly reports on its USO performance.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Number allocation and portability

Describe the number allocation scheme and number portability regime in your jurisdiction.

All operators providing a PATS must provide number portability to subscribers at no direct charge. Operators must ensure that the porting of numbers is carried out within the shortest possible time; numbers must be activated within one working day and loss of service during the process may not exceed one working day. ComReg may specify the payment of compensation to subscribers for delays in porting.

ComReg has confirmed as part of 2013 and 2017 decisions on machine-to-machine numbering, that number portability is in principle an entitlement of machine-to-machine number holders.

ComReg is tasked with the management of the National Numbering Scheme, including attaching conditions to rights of use for numbers and generally makes allocations and reservations of numbering capacity from the scheme to notified

network operators, who each sub-allocate individual numbers to service providers and end users. ComReg's tasks include:

- assigning numbers for existing services;
- developing frameworks for new and innovative services;
- ensuring numbers are used following conditions of use set out in the Numbering Conditions of Use; and
- monitoring number utilisation and number changes when required.

Applications for allocation are made via an application form and numbers are granted on a first come, first served basis except when starting allocation from newly allocated number ranges. Allocation is carried out in an open, transparent and non-discriminatory manner. ComReg currently does not charge fees to recipients for allocations of numbers.

In December 2018, ComReg introduced measures regulating the costs of using non-geographic numbers. Since 1 December 2019, the cost of a call to a non-geographic number cannot exceed the cost of calling a landline number.

Since 1 January 2022, the number of non-geographic number (NGN) ranges available in Ireland has been reduced from five to two. The 1850, 1890 and 076 NGN ranges are no longer in service. 1800 Freephone and 0818 Standard Rate NGNs remain in operation. These changes will simplify NGNs and provide clarity on the costs of calling the two remaining NGN ranges (1800 and 0818). For callers, 1800 calls are free. Calls to 0818 are included in customer call bundles that include calls to landlines or, out of bundle, charged at the Standard Rate, which is no more than the cost of calling a landline.

Notably, for organisations, the cost of maintaining 1800 numbers has reduced significantly since the introduction of new wholesale charges last year. In general, there is no per call cost to an organisation for receiving an 0818 call.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Customer terms and conditions

Are customer terms and conditions in the communications sector subject to specific rules?

Operators providing a publicly available ECN or ECS must provide certain standard contract conditions to consumers in a clear, comprehensive and easily accessible form (eg, details of price and tariffs and contract duration, etc). Operators must notify customers one month in advance of any proposed changes to their terms and conditions and of their right to withdraw without penalty if they do not accept the changes. Failure to do so may be prosecuted as a criminal matter as failure to comply is an offence. It is a defence to establish that reasonable steps were taken to comply, or that it was not possible to comply, with the requirement. ComReg also has the choice of bringing a civil action for non-compliance to the High Court. ComReg has not specified a medium to be used for contract change notifications but provides that notifications must be presented to customers clearly, unambiguously and transparently, and must include certain minimum information.

Following implementation in Ireland, the EECC is set to strengthen and harmonise consumer protection across the European Union. Telecoms operators will be required to implement a number of changes to give effect to the new end-user rights introduced in the EECC. These include, inter alia:

- developing pre-contract summary templates in line with the prescriptive guidelines set out in the EECC;
- building in the provision of best tariff advice and best tariff information into the contract process; and
- updating the scripts of the customer service representatives to comply with the obligations set out in the EECC in relation to cancellation, renewal and automatic prolongation of contracts.

ComReg has initiated enforcement actions regarding several alleged breaches of the rules and most recently issued notices of non-compliance against eir, Vodafone Ireland, Virgin Media Ireland and Sky Ireland in 2018 for failure to notify customers in the prescribed manner as required under the Universal Service Regulations.

ComReg has also issued several requirements concerning bills and billing mediums. By way of example, consumers must have a choice about whether to receive paper bills or alternative billing mediums, and a paper bill must be provided free of charge where access to online billing is not possible.

ComReg's enforcement powers concerning consumer contracts derive from both the telecommunications framework (the Universal Service Regulations) and the European Union (Consumer Information, Cancellation and Other Rights) Regulations 2013 (SI 484/2013) (the Consumer Information Regulations) (following Directive 2011/83/EU (Consumer Rights)). Consumer contract compliance continues to be a core focus of ComReg, and it has engaged in several enforcement actions against operators in recent years including the following examples.

In 2016, ComReg imposed a €255,000 fixed penalty notice on Virgin Media Ireland for failure to provide 26,046 of its customers with a contract in a durable form in contravention of the Consumer Information Regulations 2013. ComReg investigated Virgin Media Ireland as a result of complaints from Virgin customers who claimed the lack of a contract in durable form made it difficult for the affected Virgin Media Ireland customers to identify the precise charges to which they were subject. This was the first time that ComReg has imposed fixed penalty notices (FPNs). ComReg has the power to issue FPNs under the Consumer Protection Act 2007 for breaches of the Consumer Information Regulations 2013.

In 2017, ComReg initiated an investigation into how Vodafone Ireland notified its customers of changes to their roaming terms and conditions (to include an automatic opt-in provision). ComReg determined Vodafone Ireland incorrectly notified its customers of this change and imposed a fine of €250,000 and forced Vodafone Ireland to remediate its customers to the tune of €2.5 million. Vodafone Ireland also made binding commitments not to use auto opt-ins in future.

In 2018, Sky Ireland made a settlement and paid ComReg €117,000 concerning an alleged failure to provide customers with a contract on a durable medium, and breaches of their right to a cooling-off period. As part of this settlement, Sky Ireland agreed to take remedial action to prevent any further breaches of these consumer obligations.

In 2018, ComReg brought proceedings against Yourtel concerning billing customers for a service that it was alleged was never received. In February 2019, Yourtel consented to orders before the Commercial Court requiring it to cease its contraventions (and has since been served with restraining orders to prevent it from doing so). Eir was fined €23,500 and received 10 separate criminal convictions concerning 10 counts of incorrect charging of customers for electronic communications services.

In 2019, the District Court heard a prosecution taken by ComReg against Pure Telecom Limited concerning Pure Telecom failing to provide full pricing information in its customer contracts. Pure Telecom pleaded guilty to the counts brought against it and in lieu of a conviction was required to make a charitable donation of €10,000. ComReg also found Vodafone Ireland was non-compliant because it did not provide customers of its 'Extra' Pay as You Go product with their contract on a durable medium, in contravention of the Consumer Information Regulations 2013. ComReg reached a settlement agreement with Vodafone Ireland that included an undertaking by Vodafone Ireland to refund 72,774 customers the sum of €416,972.

ComReg has brought cases in the Dublin District Court against eir, Vodafone Ireland and Yourtel in recent years. In June 2018, eir plead guilty to 10 offences concerning overcharging customers and paid a total of €23,500. Vodafone Ireland had the Probation Act applied to it on condition that it donates €7,500 to charity and Vodafone Ireland agreed to contribute to ComReg's costs of €15,000, and Yourtel pled guilty to failing to comply with a statutory request for information and was required to make a payment towards ComReg's costs (the Yourtel case related to an overcharging complaint). Following a further investigation, ComReg, since February 2019, applied for, and received, a restraining order concerning Yourtel and the overcharging of customers (as Yourtel had 89 prior convictions for such

an offence).

In February 2020, Virgin Media Ireland entered into a settlement agreement with ComReg following a failure to comply with Regulation 14 of the Universal Service Regulations. Virgin Media's non-compliance related to the manner in which tariffs associated with certain extra charges, for example, late payment fee and unpaid direct debit fee, were presented and subsequently charged by Virgin Media to portions of its customers. It concerned, in particular, the transparency and accessibility of the contractual provisions relating to those tariffs. Virgin Media agreed to refund the sum of €420,200 to approximately 24,000 customers who were charged all or any of the extra charges during the period from 1 September 2016 to 27 October 2017. In March 2020, Three Ireland paid ComReg a penalty of €51,000 after an investigation found that between July 2017 and November 2019, Three Ireland had failed to provide 57,147 of its 'affinity plan' customers who signed up via a sales agent with a contract on durable medium, contrary to Regulation 12 of the Consumer Information Regulations 2013.

More recently, in May 2021, Tesco Mobile advised ComReg that 27,500 customers were impacted by the charging of Post Cancellation Charges to a value of €388,000. Tesco Mobile made a commitment to ComReg to refund all affected customers. Tesco Mobile's review of its billing system to determine whether its customers were being charged for services beyond the cancellation of their contracts came on foot of a December 2020 ComReg publication that detailed the outcome of a ComReg investigation into Virgin Media Ireland and its then practice of charging customers beyond the cancellation of their contract for what was termed 'post cancellation charges'. ComReg secured a commitment from Virgin Media that it would provide accumulative refunds of approximately €3 million to all affected customers by 31 March 2021.

In November 2018, ComReg announced Formal Dispute Resolution Procedures for End-Users of Electronic Communication Services and Networks, introducing structures and timelines for disputes concerning any regulations under which ComReg has the power to resolve disputes. These measures entered into force in September 2019. Formal Dispute Resolution Procedures apply to issues for end users of mobile phones, home phones and broadband whose complaints have been unresolved for 40 working days or more after lodging a complaint with a service provider. ComReg will adjudicate the dispute once the end user has applied for the service. The application procedure is set out in greater detail in Annex 2 of ComReg document 18/104.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Net neutrality

Are there limits on an internet service provider's freedom to control or prioritise the type or source of data that it delivers? Are there any other specific regulations or guidelines on net neutrality?

The Telecom Single Market Regulation, effective from June 2017, laid down measures regarding open internet access and net neutrality. ComReg has stated that its approach to network neutrality will be informed by ongoing Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (BEREC) work.

BEREC published its Guidelines on Net Neutrality to National Regulatory Authorities (NRAs) on 6 September 2016 providing guidance for NRAs to take into account when implementing the rules and assessing specific cases. On 30 June 2020, ComReg published its 2020 Report on the Implementation of the Net Neutrality Regulations in Ireland (as obliged under Regulation (EU) 2015/2120 (the TSM Regulation) and outlined how ComReg would:

- safeguard open internet access;
- ensure transparency measures are in place for open internet access;
- supervise and enforce breaches of the TSM Regulation; and
- impose penalties for such breaches.

In its 2020 Report, ComReg found that having regard to the implementation of the Net Neutrality Regulation, it found no evidence for the existence of relevant zero-rated services in Ireland. This is in contrast to a similar report by ComReg from 2019 that stated that it was aware of zero-rating practices in Ireland. A 'zero-rating' practice typically involves an internet service provider (ISP) excluding the use of certain applications and services from customers' data consumption limits. From a competition perspective, zero rating raises a number of concerns as it allows ISPs to prioritise access to certain applications and (or) services. Thus, this may fall foul of article 3 of the Net Neutrality Regulations pursuant to the fact that ISPs may not limit end users' access and distribution rights through agreements or commercial practices. This is important in the context of the recent decision regarding the CJEU joined cases of C-807/18 and C-39/19, Telenor Magyarország Zrt v Nemzeti Média- és Hírközlési Hatóság Elnöke (15 September 2020) in which it was held that an internet package that included zero rating for certain applications and services, and allowed unrestricted access only to those services once a certain data volume had been exhausted, was liable to restrict the rights contained in article 3(1) of the Net Neutrality Regulation while also reducing the use of other applications and services.

It is noted that ISPs are permitted to put reasonable traffic management measures in place so long as they are transparent, non-discriminatory and proportionate, as well as being used as being based on technical requirements.

The European Union (Open Internet Access) Regulations 2019 (SI 343/2019) gives enforcement powers to ComReg concerning net neutrality. ComReg may give a direction to an undertaking requiring the undertaking to take a measure under article 5(1) of SI 343/2019. Where ComReg finds an undertaking has not complied with its direction or with the obligations under the Net Neutrality Regulations, and that undertaking has not corrected its behaviour following a notification from ComReg, ComReg can seek an order from the High Court, which can include an order for payment of a financial penalty to ComReg.

In December 2019, ComReg issued notifications of non-compliance for breaches of net neutrality regulations to seven telecommunications companies operating in Ireland. The notifications were issued to internet access service providers regarding transparency breaches in their consumer contracts. With the recent expansion of its powers, ComReg has taken formal enforcement action against providers who appeared to have not been providing the required information in their customer contracts concerning net neutrality.

ComReg's 2020 Report notes that it devotes considerable resources to relevant BEREC workstreams related to net neutrality and to engage with its peer NRAs to ensure that its approach to net neutrality is consistent with that being taken by regulators across the European Union.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Platform regulation

Is there specific legislation or regulation in place, and have there been any enforcement initiatives relating to digital platforms?

In addition to Part 8 of the Broadcasting Act 2009, which provides for digital broadcasting and the associated migration from analogue television, there is limited regulation of digital platforms in Irish law.

Regulation (EU) 2019/1150 (the Platform to Business Regulations) came into force in Irish law in July 2020, which provides a framework to ensure a transparent and predictable business environment for smaller businesses and traders on online platforms and marketplaces. These rules apply to intermediation service providers and search engine providers and include rules concerning terms and conditions and equal treatment of products. These are enforced by the CCPC in Ireland.

To the extent that a digital platform provides an ECS or ECN (or both), it would be subject to the authorisation regime

set out in the Authorisation Regulations, which confers a general right to provide ECN or ECS (or both) subject to certain conditions.

Following publication on 14 June 2022, once enacted, the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill (the OSMR Bill) will transpose the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive into Irish law, including the regulation of video-sharing platform services as part of the regulatory framework for online safety.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Next-Generation-Access (NGA) networks

Are there specific regulatory obligations applicable to NGA networks? Is there a government financial scheme to promote basic broadband or NGA broadband penetration?

In November 2018, ComReg issued a decision concluding that eir continued to hold SMP in the wholesale broadband access market and, as such, imposed a series of remedies on eir. Such remedies are designed to ensure telecoms operators have access to eir's wholesale services, including the imposition of price control obligations concerning the fibre-to-the-cabinet wholesale market through a cost-orientation obligation. This decision was based on a market review carried out by ComReg examining the nature and structure of the wholesale broadband access markets.

Following a stakeholder consultation, the government approved plans for a new National Broadband Plan that will provide the initial stimulus required to deliver high-speed broadband to every city, town, village and individual premises in Ireland. There were several delays in the design and procurement phases of the NBP owing to negotiations with another commercial provider (eir) seeking to provide high-speed broadband to some of the areas originally designated under the NBP. Most recently, one bidder, National Broadband Ireland (NBI), was selected as the preferred bidder to deliver the NBP project. In a recent update provided by NBI in April 2022 with respect to the roll-out or deployment of the high-speed broadband network, it is envisaged that by year-end 2022, NBI is on track to have 221,000 homes in the 'under construction' phase of the project, with 128,000 homes 'available to order'. NBI also said it expects the number of premises passed by the network to be 102,000 homes, an increase of 102 per cent.

The NBP follows several previous state-funded broadband schemes in operation in Ireland:

- the Metropolitan Area Networks Scheme, which aimed to create open-access fibre networks in more than 120 Irish towns for €170 million with support from EU structural funds;
- the National Broadband Scheme, operated by Three Ireland, provided mobile broadband to all premises in locations where no services were available or likely to be made available by the market (this contract expired in August 2014); and
- the Rural Broadband Scheme, which aimed to provide broadband to parts of Ireland where it was not commercially available and was designed to meet the needs of the last 1 per cent of the population not covered by any service.

Previous governments established the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce to identify immediate solutions to broadband and mobile phone coverage deficits and to investigate how better services could be provided to consumers before the full build and rollout of the network planned under the NBP. The Taskforce published its report in 2017 outlining the issues considered and set out its recommendations and actions to alleviate barriers to mobile reception and broadband access, and the DECC publishes quarterly updates on how the recommendations are being implemented. While ComReg does not have direct responsibility for the implementation of the NBP, the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce outlines several regulatory actions that can assist in the NBP rollout, and ComReg has announced it will undertake such action areas that support the Taskforce's objectives.

Separately to the NBP, in June 2018, ComReg decided to legalise some mobile phone repeaters in an attempt to boost the coverage of mobile phone services in respect of indoor reception. This was a key recommendation of the government's Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce. ComReg decided to make certain mobile phone repeaters licence-exempt provided certain technical conditions as outlined in the ComReg decision are met.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Data protection

Is there a specific data protection regime applicable to the communications sector?

The communications sector is subject to the general Irish data protection regime as set out in the Data Protection Act 2018.

The Communications (Retention of Data) Act 2011 sets out a specific regime for the retention of certain communications data for, inter alia, the investigation, detection and prosecution of criminal offences. A regime is also in place for the interception of communications by the Irish police force and the Defence Forces. The CJEU recently found that Directive 2006/24/EC (Data Retention), the basis for the Communications (Retention of Data) Act 2011, was invalid. As a result of the CJEU decision, no specific legal act at the EU level obliges Ireland to maintain a data retention regime in place. In December 2018, the Irish High Court ruled that the 2011 Act is incompatible with EU and European Convention on Human Rights law, and the Supreme Court recently referred this issue to the European Court of Justice.

While the 2011 Act formally remains law in Ireland, the government has published the General Scheme of the Communications (Retention of Data) Bill 2017 designed to replace the 2011 Act. The 2011 Privacy Regulations from the EU electronic communications reform package previously mentioned also apply pending the publication of the proposed ePrivacy Regulation.

On 25 May 2018, Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (General Data Protection Regulation) (GDPR) came into force across the European Union and is implemented in Ireland through the Data Protection Act 2018. This follows a two-year implementation period following which the GDPR will replace existing Directive 95/46/EC (Data Protection). The GDPR aims to harmonise data protection across the European Union and will affect how the communications sector operates.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Cybersecurity

Is there specific legislation or regulation in place concerning cybersecurity or network security in your jurisdiction?

The Criminal Justice (Offences Relating to Information Systems) Act 2017 was the first piece of national legislation specifically relating to cybercrime and is designed to modernise the Irish framework relating to such crimes (previous legislation referred to 'unlawful use of a computer' that did not adequately address problems facing current society).

This legislation introduced several new offences such as:

- accessing an information system without lawful authority;
- interfering with an information system without lawful authority to intentionally hinder or interrupt its functioning;
- interfering with data without lawful authority;
- intercepting the transmission of data without lawful authority; and
- use of a computer, password, code or data for the commission of any of the above offences.

Other pieces of legislation that include cybersecurity-related provisions also include:

- the GDPR: data controllers are required to take 'appropriate security measures' against unauthorised access, alteration, disclosure or destruction of data, in particular where the processing involves the transmission of data over a network, and comply with strict reporting obligations in relation to incidents;
- the Privacy Regulations: require providers to implement appropriate technical and organisational measures to safeguard the security of its services and report incidents. It also prohibits interception or surveillance of communications and the related traffic data over a publicly available ECS without users' consent; and
- SI 360/2018 European Union (Measures for a High Common Level of Security of Network and Information Systems) Regulations 2018 (the NISD Regulations): the NISD Regulations require that operators of essential services (OES) and digital services take appropriate measures to prevent and minimise the impact of incidents affecting the security of the network and information systems used for the provision of essential and digital services with a view to ensuring continuity.

The DECC published an updated National Cybersecurity Strategy in December 2019 (effective until 2024). Objectives of the strategy include:

- to continue to improve the ability of the state to respond to and manage cybersecurity incidents;
- to identify and protect critical national infrastructure by ensuring that essential services have appropriate cybersecurity incident response plans;
- to improve the resilience and security of public sector IT systems;
- to invest in educational initiatives to prepare the workforce for advanced IT and cybersecurity careers;
- to raise awareness of the responsibilities of businesses around securing their networks, devices and information; and
- to invest in research and development in cybersecurity in Ireland.

In common with similar bodies in other EU member states, the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) has also steadily moved towards a more proactive approach across a range of areas. The provisions of the NISD Regulations have been used to develop a quasi-regulatory approach for critical infrastructure providers, an approach that operates in tandem with the NCSC's existing and ongoing work. Enforcement powers under the NISD Regulations allow NCSC-authorized officers to conduct security assessments and audits, require the provision of information and issue binding instructions to remedy any deficiencies.

Measure 7 of the NCSC's 2019 Strategy sets out how the Irish government will introduce a new and specific set of security requirements for the telecommunications sector, with detailed risk mitigation measures to be developed by the NCSC. Over the course of 2020, a working group consisting of the NCSC, ComReg and selected providers of ECN and ECS held a series of thematic workshops culminating in a set of documents known as the Electronic Communications Security Measures or ECSMs. The security measures contained in the ECSMs will be provided with a legislative basis through the transposition of the EECC. The ECSMs were subject to a technical stakeholder consultation process in January 2022 and are now being further considered by the DECC.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Big data

Is there specific legislation or regulation in place, and have there been any enforcement initiatives in your jurisdiction, addressing the legal challenges raised by big data?

No new data protection legislation has been introduced in Ireland to deal specifically with big data, so the debate has focused on the application of general data protection rules to each new way in which personal data are collected, stored, used and analysed.

For instance, current data protection law requires that personal data is only used for specific purposes, which, naturally, restricts the trend in big data to make use of data in previously unknown ways. This means that big-data systems should ideally be set up with this purpose limitation in mind, with each new use of personal data generating its own risk profile. There have been discussions around the use of techniques to effectively anonymise or pseudonymise personal data as a solution to this, so that the data falls outside the scope of data protection rules, although achieving this can sometimes be difficult.

While this may somewhat limit the ability to commercially exploit big data, the enforcement of data protection law in Ireland is not static and is adaptable to each new innovation. The Irish Data Protection Commissioner takes a pragmatic approach to the treatment of big data and considers meaningful consultation with organisations operating in this space, including the many leading multinational technology companies based in Ireland, as essential to this strategy. The Edward Snowden allegations of large-scale access by US authorities of EU citizens' personal data have brought the treatment of big data to the forefront of political discussion in the European Union, including Ireland. Significant changes are likely to come about as a result of the GDPR, implemented in Ireland by the Data Protection Act 2018.

Concerning big data, article 22 of the GDPR provides inter alia that:

Section 57 of the Data Protection Act 2018 gives effect to article 22 of the GDPR in outlining the rights of the individual concerning automated decision making. As such, automated processing is only permitted with the express consent of the individual, when necessary for the performance of a contract or where authorised by EU or EU member state law. Also, where automated processing is permitted, measures must be in place to protect the individual (eg, the right to present their point of view). Automated processing can apply to sensitive personal data (as outlined under the Data Protection Act 2018) based on express consent or reasons of substantial public interest.

Many of the big data companies have important locations for their businesses in Ireland. The Data Protection Commissioner (DPC) is tasked with investigating breaches of data regulation by these companies where such breaches occur in this jurisdiction. The DPC opened an inquiry into Facebook in 2019 on how it stored user login data, and in 2018 the DPC investigated Facebook for non-compliance with its obligation under the GDPR to implement technical and organisational measures to ensure the security and safeguarding of the personal data it processes.

On 23 April 2022, the European Commission welcomed an agreement reached between the European Parliament and the EU member states on the proposed Digital Markets Act (DMA). The DMA aims to tighten regulation in respect of the largest global tech companies (referred to as 'gatekeepers') from using their 'interlocking services' to combine data from multiple platforms and allow big tech to gain sophisticated profiles of users. Among the key changes as part of the DMA, it is envisaged that combined personal data for targeted advertising will only be allowed with explicit consent from the gatekeeper.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Data localisation

Are there any laws or regulations that require data to be stored locally in the jurisdiction?

There are no laws or regulations that require data to be stored locally in Ireland. The Data Protection Act 2018 does not detail specific security measures that a data controller or data processor must have in place, although the

Authorisation Regulations 2011 detail some requirements specific to the electronic communications services sector. Instead, the Data Protection Act 2018 places an obligation on data controllers to ensure that data is processed in a manner that ensures 'appropriate security of the data'. The measures used by the data controller must ensure that a level of security is provided that is proportionate to the harm that may result from destruction, loss, alteration or disclosure of the data. Data controllers and data processors are also obliged to ensure that their staff and 'other persons at the place of work' are aware of security measures and comply with them. The legal obligation to keep personal data secure applies to every data controller and data processor, regardless of size.

Section 96 of the Data Protection Act 2018 specifies conditions that must be met before personal data may be transferred to third countries. Organisations that transfer personal data from Ireland to third countries (ie, places outside of the European Economic Area) need to ensure that the country in question provides an adequate level of data protection. Some third countries have been approved for this purpose by the EU Commission. The adequacy decision of the European Commission that underpinned the US Safe Harbour arrangement has now been invalidated by a decision of the CJEU of 6 October 2015 (Case C-362/14). Consequently, it is no longer lawful to make transfers based on the EU-US Safe Harbour framework. This was replaced by the EU-US Privacy Shield, which imposes stronger obligations on US companies to take measures to protect personal data.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Key trends and expected changes

Summarise the key emerging trends and hot topics in communications regulation in your jurisdiction.

In the Electronic Communications Strategy Statement 2021–2023, ComReg identified four principle trends it considers will both shape the sector and pose regulatory challenges over the next five years, and are as follows:

- enhanced connectivity and new technologies: the deployment of high-speed ECN will play an increasingly important role across the country over the next 5 years, enabling innovation and digitalisation across different sectors of Irish society. In addition to ensuring coverage and reliability, a key consideration regarding future networks and connectivity will be improving security and reliance. Network security depends not only on technical security features, but also on the design, implementation, and operation of the network;
- the consumer experience: the development of networks and the adoption of new technologies have enabled people to connect in new ways. Enterprise and Consumers' reliance on ECN and ECS to carry out various social and economic-related activities has only accelerated with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the pattern of network rollout across the country as well as varying levels of technology adoption across demographics mean that consumer experiences in the sector are not uniform. ComReg has a role to protect consumers' rights and prevent operators from exploiting consumers in the telecom markets;
- the evolution of adjacent and related markets: as the markets relevant to the regulation of ECN and ECS evolve, the lines between them blur and change the industry's structure and competitive landscape. Due to these changing dynamics, effective regulation will require an understanding of the complex ecosystem of related markets and the role of electronic communications as an enabler of innovation in these markets; and
- the changing future of regulation in the sector: given the rapidly evolving and expanding nature of the ECS sector, the final key trend relates to the range of developments in regulation that will arise during ComReg's strategy statement. In addition to the transposition of the EECC and the 2020 Programme for Government's commitment to the publication of a National Digital Strategy, several legislative changes and developments are anticipated to take place that will impact ComReg's role and mandate, concerning the following areas:
 - consumer protection mandate;
 - cybersecurity strategy for the digital decade;

- broadband cost reduction;
- privacy and electronic communications; and
- market surveillance.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

MEDIA

Regulatory and institutional structure

Summarise the regulatory framework for the media sector in your jurisdiction.

The broadcasting sector in Ireland is regulated by the Broadcasting Act 2009 (as amended) (the Broadcasting Act), which established a content regulator, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) and sets out the regulatory framework for the media and broadcasting sector in the state. The Commission for Communications Regulation's (ComReg) role in respect of the broadcasting sector is limited to the issuing of licences under the Wireless Telegraphy Acts, in respect of wireless equipment and assignment of required radio spectrum.

The Broadcasting Act and regulator are due to be modernised and changed in legislation expected to be enacted by the end of 2022 – the OSMR Bill, which was brought before Seanad Éireann on 25 January 2022 for consideration for enactment, transposes the provisions of Directive (EU) 2018/1808 (the 2018 Directive), which revises Directive (EU) 2010/13 (the 2010 Directive), into Irish law.

Among numerous things, the OSMR Bill establishes a new regulator, a multi-person Media Commission to which an Online Safety Commissioner will be appointed. The Media Commission will replace the BAI and be responsible for overseeing updated regulations for broadcasting and video-on-demand services and the new regulatory framework for online safety created by the OSMR Bill. Within its structure, it is envisaged to have a chairperson and separate commissioners overseeing broadcast media, on-demand media and online safety, although this is not explicitly referenced in the General Scheme. The OSMR Bill also provides for additional powers for the Media Commission in relation to compliance and enforcement, including the power to impose administrative financial sanctions.

The OSMR Bill proposes extensive provisions for online safety and sets out a definition for harmful online content. This transposes requirements under the revised AVMSD (the 2018 Directive) with regard to video-sharing platforms. However, the OSMR Bill also proposes a definition of age-inappropriate online content and sets out procedures for addressing harmful online content. These procedures include the formulation of online safety codes by the Media Commission, addressed to designated online services.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Ownership restrictions

Do any foreign ownership restrictions apply to media services? Is the ownership or control of broadcasters otherwise restricted? Are there any regulations in relation to the cross-ownership of media companies, including radio, television and newspapers?

Non-EU applicants for broadcasting contracts are required to have their place of residence or registered office within the European Union or as otherwise required by EU law. The framework for the ownership and control policy of the BAI is set out in the Broadcasting Act, which requires the BAI, in awarding a sound broadcasting contract or television programme service contract (or consent to a change of control of the holder of a broadcasting contract), to have regard, inter alia, to the desirability of allowing any person or group of persons to have control of or substantial interests in an 'undue number' of sound broadcasting services, or an 'undue amount' of communications media in a

specified area. The BAI has also issued an ownership and control policy, setting out the regulatory approach that the BAI will take and the rules that will be enforced regarding ownership and control of broadcasting services. The policy will be used by the BAI to assess applications for broadcasting contracts and requests for variations in ownership and control structures of contract holders.

Media mergers must be notified to both the Irish Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) and the relevant minister. The CCPC is responsible for carrying out the substantive competition review to determine whether the merger is likely to give rise to a substantial lessening of competition. It is the role of the Minister for Communications (the Minister) to assess 'whether the result of the media merger will not be contrary to the public interest in protecting the plurality of the media in the State' and this includes a review of 'diversity of ownership and diversity of content'. The Competition Acts provide for a set of 'relevant criteria' by which the Minister for Communications must assess whether the media merger will be likely to affect the plurality of the media in the state. In particular, the relevant criteria include considering, inter alia, the undesirability of allowing one undertaking to hold significant interests within a sector of the media business, the promotion of media plurality and the adequacy of the existing state-funded broadcasters to protect the public interest in a plurality of the media in the state. The Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment published Media Merger Guidelines in May 2015. In the interests of transparency, the Minister publishes summary details of the rationale for clearing media mergers.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Licensing requirements

What are the licensing requirements for broadcasting, including the fees payable and the timescale for the necessary authorisations?

The BAI is responsible for the licensing of the national television service, and content on digital, cable, multimedia displays and satellite systems. The licensing of content on these systems is an ongoing process with no time frame for applications, no competitive licensing process and one-off application fees (these depend on the licence being acquired but are typically less than €2,000).

The BAI is responsible for the licensing of independent radio broadcasting services in Ireland and Part 6 of the Broadcasting Act sets out the mechanism by which the BAI shall undertake the licensing process for commercial, community temporary and institutional radio services.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Foreign programmes and local content requirements

Are there any regulations concerning the broadcasting of foreign-produced programmes? Do the rules require a minimum amount of local content? What types of media fall outside this regime?

The European Communities (Audiovisual Media Services) Regulations 2010 (SI 258/2010) and the European Communities (Audiovisual Media Services) (Amendment) Regulations 2012 (SI 247/2012) (the AVMS Regulations) implement the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) (2010 Directive). The AVMS Regulations outline that, where practicable and by appropriate means, broadcasters must progressively reserve at least 10 per cent of their transmission time (excluding the time applied to news, sports events, games, advertising and teletext services) for European works created by producers who are independent of broadcasters, or reserve 10 per cent of their programming budget for European works that are created by producers who are independent of broadcasters, having regard to its various public responsibilities. The AVMS Regulations require EU member states to ensure that on-demand audiovisual media services also promote European works; however, quotas for European works are not

imposed on non-linear audiovisual services.

In transposing the revised AVMSD (2018 Directive), the OSMR Bill is set to implement a new 30 per cent quota for European works in the catalogues of video-on-demand services, alongside a content production levy and content production scheme to support the creation of European works, including independent Irish productions. This will translate into an obligation for video-on-demand services, such as Apple TV or Disney Plus, to meet a quota of 30 per cent and ensure the prominence of European content in their catalogues, and is to be regulated across Europe depending on the country where the company is based. Ireland will be responsible for regulating a significant number of these companies because it is home to the headquarters of a number of social media companies such as Apple and Google. It will be considered a criminal offence for an on-demand audiovisual media service to not comply with this obligation and the relevant rules in its application.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Advertising

How is broadcast media advertising regulated? Is online advertising subject to the same regulation?

The BAI is currently tasked with the development, review and revision of codes and rules concerning advertising standards to be observed by broadcasters, and consideration of and adjudication on complaints concerning material that is broadcast, including advertising. The Broadcasting Act provides that advertising codes must protect the interests of the audience and in particular, any advertising relating to matters of direct or indirect interest to children must protect the interests of children and their health. By way of example, the BAI has issued General and Children's Commercial Communications Codes, including rules to be applied to the promotion of high fat, salt and sugar foods to children. Further rules are set out in the AVMS Regulations concerning 'audiovisual commercial communications' on on-demand services. The BAI's General Commercial Communications Code sets out the rules with which Irish radio and television stations must comply when it comes to airing advertising, sponsorship, product placement and other forms of commercial communications. The Broadcasting Act does not apply to broadcast services that are provided through the internet or to non-linear services, but this will change following the implementation of the OSMR Bill

A voluntary self-regulatory code is also in operation and is administered by the Advertising Standards Authority of Ireland (ASAI), which sets out guidelines for advertising concerning a range of topics including food, financial services and business products. This code applies to online advertising. On 1 March 2016, the new ASAI Code of Standards for Advertising and Marketing Communications in Ireland came into effect. The updated Code features new sections on e-cigarettes and gambling and revised sections on food (including rules for advertisements addressed to children), health and beauty and environmental claims. Further, broadcasters should observe relevant national and EU rules on advertising of specific types of products and services (eg, alcohol, tobacco, health foods, airfares, etc) and consumer protection rules on types of advertising practices permitted (eg, consumer information requirements, misleading information rules, etc).

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Must-carry obligations

Are there regulations specifying a basic package of programmes that must be carried by operators' broadcasting distribution networks? Is there a mechanism for financing the costs of such obligations?

The Broadcasting Act requires 'appropriate network providers' to ensure, if requested, the retransmission by or through

their appropriate network of each free-to-air television service provided for the time being by RTÉ, TG4 and Virgin Media Ireland's free-to-air service. An appropriate network is defined as an electronic communications network provided by a person, the 'appropriate network provider', that is used for the distribution or transmission of broadcasting services to the public. The appropriate network provider is not permitted to impose a charge for the above-mentioned channels.

A public service broadcasting charge was suggested by previous governments as a means of funding public broadcasting in light of the changing ways that viewers now access public service broadcasting. However, such plans have been shelved and, the current Minister for Communications (the Minister) recently announced that there was little chance of this being introduced and the government would not introduce the necessary enabling legislation.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Regulation of new media content

Is new media content and its delivery regulated differently from traditional broadcast media?
How?

The Internet Services Providers Association of Ireland (ISPAI) has responsibility for supervising the ongoing evolution of the self-regulation of the internet in Ireland and has set out guidelines in its Code of Practice and Ethics (the Code) that ISPAI members should take into account when operating.

In its statement of policy, the ISPAI acknowledges that its members must observe their legal obligation to remove illegal content when informed by organs of the state or as otherwise required by law. The general requirements of the Code issued by the ISPAI include a requirement on all members to use best endeavours to ensure that services (excluding third-party content) and promotional material do not contain anything that is illegal or is likely to mislead by inaccuracy, ambiguity, exaggeration, omission or otherwise. They must also ensure that services and promotional material are not used to promote or facilitate any practices that are contrary to Irish law, nor must any services contain material that incites violence, cruelty, racial hatred or prejudice or discrimination of any kind.

Members' internet service providers are also required to register with www.hotline.ie, which is a notification service to facilitate the reporting of suspected breaches under the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998 (as amended by the Child Trafficking and Pornography (Amendment) Act 2004) and the removal of illegal material from internet websites.

The On-Demand Audiovisual Media Services Code of Conduct is an industry-developed code that covers on-demand audiovisual services in Ireland, addressing topics such as advertising, content standards and dispute resolution.

The regulation of new media content will change following the implementation of the OSMR Bill and the creation of the new regulator, the Media Commission. The Media Commission will be tasked with the responsibility of overseeing updated regulations for broadcasting and video-on-demand services. This will update how television broadcasting services and video-on-demand services are regulated, to ensure greater regulatory alignment between traditional linear TV and video-on-demand services, such as RTÉ Player and Apple TV. As part of the Media Commission's statutory remit, it will create binding Media Codes and Rules reflecting the standards that audiovisual services must adhere to in relation to programme content, and may investigate the compliance of audiovisual media services with Media Codes, Media Rules, on its own initiative or on the basis of a complaint. The Media Commission will have the power to seek the imposition of a number of sanctions on a non-compliant on-demand audiovisual media service, in the event that they have failed to comply with a warning notice. It will also have the power to seek the prosecution of senior management of designated online services for failure to comply with a notice to end non-compliance.

The Media Commission will also have the power to impose a levy on registered providers' Irish revenue, which would be used to fund its regulatory activities and new grant schemes for Irish media production. However, this power will not be exercised until there is a full review and consultation on its merits and it is not intended that a levy would be imposed

on providers with a minimal Irish presence.

As provided for in the Broadcasting Act, television broadcasting services are regulated on a contractual basis and non-compliance by such services with Media Codes and Media Rules may be pursued by the Media Commission as a breach of contract. Non-compliance with these obligations will be dealt with through a stepped process of compliance and warning notices. Ultimately, non-compliance with a warning notice is a criminal offence.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Digital switchover

When is the switchover from analogue to digital broadcasting required or when did it occur? How will radio frequencies freed up by the switchover be reallocated?

The digital switchover occurred on 24 October 2012. The 800 megahertz (MHz) band had been used for analogue terrestrial television services. This spectrum was auctioned off (along with the 900MHz and 1,800MHz spectrum) in autumn 2012 for use in electronic communications services (ECSs).

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Digital formats

Does regulation restrict how broadcasters can use their spectrum?

As required by the legislative framework, ComReg has moved towards a position where it will issue licences on a technology and service-neutral basis and that new rights of use will issue on a service and technology-neutral basis. For example, ComReg awarded the 3.6 gigahertz spectrum band in 2017, following a lengthy consultation process on a service and technology-neutral basis (ie, holders of the new rights of use may choose to provide any service capable of being delivered using the assigned spectrum). For instance, they could distribute television programming content, subject to complying with the relevant technical conditions and with any necessary broadcasting content authorisations or they could adopt some other use. ComReg may, through licence conditions or otherwise, provide for proportionate and non-discriminatory restrictions to the types of radio network or wireless access technology used for ECSs where this is necessary (eg, to avoid harmful interference and safeguard the efficient use of spectrum).

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Media plurality

Is there any process for assessing or regulating media plurality (or a similar concept) in your jurisdiction? May the authorities require companies to take any steps as a result of such an assessment?

The Competition Acts 2002–2017 provide for special additional rules for ‘media mergers’ (ie, a merger or acquisition in which two or more of the undertakings involved carry on a media business in the state, or that one or more of the undertakings involved carries on a media business in the state and one or more of the undertakings involved carries on a media business elsewhere). A ‘media business’ means the business (whether all or part of an undertaking’s business) of:

- the publication of newspapers or periodicals consisting substantially of news and comment on current affairs, including the publication of such newspapers or periodicals on the internet;

- transmitting, retransmitting or relaying a broadcasting service;
- providing any programme material consisting substantially of news and comment on current affairs to a broadcasting service; or
- making available on an electronic communications network any written, audiovisual or photographic material, consisting substantially of news and comment on current affairs, that is under the editorial control of the undertaking making such material available.

Media mergers are notifiable to both the CCPC and the Minister (regardless of the turnover of the undertakings concerned) to assess whether the media merger would be contrary to the public interest in protecting the plurality of the media in the state. The Competition Acts provide for a set of 'relevant criteria' by which the Minister must assess whether the media merger will be likely to affect the plurality of the media in the state. In particular, the relevant criteria include considering, inter alia, the undesirability of allowing one undertaking to hold significant interests within a sector of the media business, the promotion of media plurality and the adequacy of the existing state-funded broadcasters to protect the public interest in a plurality of the media in the state. The BAI may play a role in assessing media plurality should the transaction be referred to a phase II process by the Minister.

In terms of steps the authorities may require companies to take as a result of a media merger review, the Minister may determine that the media merger be put into effect, determine that the media merger be put into effect subject to conditions or determine that the media merger may not be put into effect. The Department of Environment, Climate Action and Communications' (DECC) Media Merger Guidelines guide the media-merger process and the DECC now publishes information regarding its process and a summary of each media merger determination in the interests of transparency. There is an ongoing review of the media merger regime by the DECC.

In June 2019, the BAI published two new documents:

- the Media Plurality Policy, which sets out how the BAI will support media plurality in the future. It sets out a definition for media plurality, outlines why media plurality is important, details policy objectives and outlines the measures the BAI takes and will take to promote and support media plurality in Ireland; and
- the Ownership and Control Policy, which will be used by the BAI to assess requests for changes to the ownership and control of existing broadcasting services. The policy provides guidance and rules for the BAI when considering the desirability of allowing any person, or group of persons, to have control of, or substantial interests in, an undue number of media services in the Irish state.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Key trends and expected changes

Provide a summary of key emerging trends and hot topics in media regulation in your country.

There has been a marked increase in the number of media mergers in Ireland, a trend that can be seen across Europe as traditional media outlets need to consolidate to ensure continued survival in a difficult environment. In 2021 alone, the CCPC reviewed and issued merger determinations in relation to five media mergers. There has only been one phase II media merger in the Irish context (2017), which involved the proposed acquisition of the Celtic Media Group by Independent News & Media and was referred to the BAI for a full media-merger examination (the first such media merger in the state). No ministerial decision was made by the Minister as the parties terminated the transaction during the lengthy process by mutual consent.

The primary legislative focus for the DECC will be the enactment of the OSMR Bill (on 23 September 2021, Ireland was directed to implement the revised AVMSD (2018 Directive) without further delay following a failure to ensure

transposition of the same before year-end 2020), which will significantly impact on how non-traditional media companies and broadcasters operate in Ireland through enhanced regulatory scrutiny by the newly established Media Commission. The full consequences of the new Media Commission regime will not be clear until the Media Commission issues the below-described Rules and Codes and we hope that these will be subject to industry consultation. However, there will be more near-term consequences, including an obligation for all providers of audiovisual on-demand services in the state to register with the Media Commission within three months of its establishment.

While noting the pending change in guard from BAI to the Media Commission, the BAI's Strategy Statement 2021–2023 also sets out five strategic themes that it considers will be of prominence over the course of the next year, namely:

- promoting diversity and plurality;
- empowering audiences;
- enhancing innovation and sectoral sustainability;
- achieving excellence and accountability;
- leadership in change;

Law stated - 28 April 2022

REGULATORY AGENCIES AND COMPETITION LAW

Regulatory agencies

Which body or bodies regulate the communications and media sectors? Is the communications regulator separate from the broadcasting or antitrust regulator? Are there mechanisms to avoid conflicting jurisdiction? Is there a specific mechanism to ensure the consistent application of competition and sectoral regulation?

The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) is currently responsible for the regulation of the broadcasting and audiovisual content sector. The Irish Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) is responsible for administering and enforcing the Competition Acts 2002–2017 across all sectors. The Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) is responsible for the regulation of the electronic communications sector and ComReg has co-competition powers with the CCPC that enable it to pursue issues arising in the electronic communications sector under competition law and to take action in respect of anticompetitive agreements and abuse of dominance. ComReg and the BAI are each party to a cooperation agreement with the CCPC to facilitate cooperation, avoid duplication and ensure consistency between the parties insofar as their activities consist of, or relate to, a competition issue.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Appeal procedure

How can decisions of the regulators be challenged and on what bases?

A decision of ComReg may either be challenged by way of judicial review or for decisions made under the Regulatory Framework a merits-based appeal under the European Communities (Electronic Communications Networks and Services) (Framework) Regulations 2011 (SI 333/2011) (the Framework Regulations) in the High Court. Under the Framework Regulations, the appeal must be brought by a user or undertaking that is affected by the decision and must be lodged within 28 calendar days of the date after the user or undertaking has been notified of the decision. An appeal can be brought based on law or errors of fact. Where the appeal is made to the High Court, either party may seek for

the matter to be transferred to the Commercial Court, which is a specialist part of the High Court that generally hears appeals within six months of the date the appeal is lodged. Lodgment of an appeal against a decision of ComReg does not automatically stay that decision unless an application for a stay or interim relief has been made.

Judicial review proceedings should be launched at the earliest opportunity or in any event within three months from the date when grounds for the application first arose (eg, the date of a ComReg decision (although this can be extended by the court if it considers that there is good and sufficient reason to do so)). The Irish courts have jurisdiction to examine the procedural fairness and lawfulness of decisions of public bodies in judicial review proceedings, rather than the merits of a decision.

Any other procedures available to remedy the matter must usually be exhausted before bringing judicial review proceedings. A decision of the BAI may be challenged by way of judicial review in the High Court. Also, a decision by the BAI to terminate or suspend a contract made under Part 6 or Part 8 of the Broadcasting Act may be appealed by the holder of the contract to the High Court under section 51 of the Broadcasting Act. A decision by the Minister for Communications (the Minister) in respect of a media merger must be brought in the High Court not later than 40 working days from the date of determination. Alternatively, this period may be extended by the High Court if it considers that there is a substantial reason why the application was not brought in the period and it is just to grant leave to appeal outside the period.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Competition law developments

Describe the main competition law trends and key merger and antitrust decisions in the communications and media sectors in your jurisdiction over the past year.

There has been a marked increase in the number of media mergers notified since the 2014 media merger regime was implemented. In 2021 alone, five media mergers were notified to the CCPC, compared to three in 2020 and four in 2019. None of these media mergers involved an extended phase I investigation and none required commitments to be entered into. In 2021, the average clearance timeframe for media mergers was of 18.8 working days within phase I, as against the statutory timeframe of 30 working days.

Some notable media mergers include:

- the 2016 proposed acquisition by Independent News & Media of seven regional newspapers that made up the Celtic Media Group. No ministerial decision was made as the parties terminated the transaction by mutual consent during the extended merger process;
- the 2017 clearance of the 21st Century Fox and Sky merger with no commitments;
- the 2018 clearance of the Trinity Mirror and Northern & Shell merger with binding CCPC commitments; and
- the 2019 clearance of Formpress' acquisition of certain business assets of Midland Tribune from Alpha Publications Limited with binding CCPC commitments (this media merger was subject to an extended phase I investigation).

The Irish Times notified the CCPC of its intention to purchase the Irish Examiner (the effect of which would reduce the number of reputable daily broadsheets from three to two) and received phase II CCPC clearance on 24 April 2018. In June 2018, the Minister decided that the proposed merger would not adversely affect the plurality of media in Ireland. The Minister noted that, because of the financial position of the target company, the proposed transaction may in fact preserve the diversity of content and thus protect media plurality in the state.

An overhaul of the Irish competition law regime is expected in 2022 upon enactment of the Competition (Amendment)

Bill 2022, which was published by the Irish government in spring 2022. The Competition (Amendment) Bill 2022 will transpose much-anticipated Directive (EU) 2019/1 (ECN+ Directive) into Irish law.

Law stated - 28 April 2022

Jurisdictions

	Australia	Holding Redlich
	Brazil	Azevedo Sette Advogados
	Egypt	Soliman, Hashish & Partners
	European Union	Simmons & Simmons
	Greece	Nikolinakos & Partners Law Firm
	Ireland	Matheson
	Italy	Simmons & Simmons
	Japan	TMI Associates
	Mexico	Nader Hayaux & Goebel
	Nigeria	Streamsowers & Köhn
	Pakistan	Legal Oracles Advocates & Coporates Consultants
	Philippines	SyCip Salazar Hernandez & Gatmaitan
	Singapore	Drew & Napier LLC
	South Korea	Bae, Kim & Lee LLC
	Switzerland	CORE Attorneys Ltd
	Taiwan	Yangming Partners
	Thailand	Formichella & Sritawat Attorneys at Law
	Turkey	SRP Legal
	United Arab Emirates	Simmons & Simmons
	United Kingdom	Simmons & Simmons