

# **Ministerial Brief**

## Communications and Broadcasting

**June**

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## Broadcasting Trends and Funding Challenges

There have been significant changes in the broadcasting sector in the past decade. The change in how people access audio visual media, away from traditional TV consumption and towards content streaming services and social media have significantly impacted the ability of traditional broadcasters to maintain audiences and sustain advertising revenues.

According to the 2019 BAI Reuters Digital Report, 52% of those aged over 65 use TV for their main news source, with 18% being from radio. In sharp contrast, of 18-24 year olds, it is 18% who rely on TV, 6% radio and 71% online (social media and other online sources).

This in turn has had a significant impact on the ability of Irish broadcasters to create specifically Irish content that reflects our individual culture, art, music and sport. It also has the potential to have a major impact on the coverage of Irish news and current affairs, especially important in light of recent developments such as online disinformation. As such, it is now more than ever imperative that trusted and reliable sources of information are publically available so as to protect the integrity of our democracy.

Both public and private media companies have been impacted by these developments in terms of the impact on advertising revenues. In the past, improvements in economic growth would have generated a rise in commercial revenues through advertising but this is no longer the case due to the shift towards digital advertising of which Facebook and Google absorb an estimated 73% of revenue.

These trends, coupled with challenges around TV licensing fee collection, such as the high evasion rate, currently running at 12.83%, the exclusion of the estimated 10% of households who don't have a TV and the relatively high collection costs of 7%, are having a critical impact on RTÉ's revenues and have resulted in a position where the financial sustainability of the organisation is now under immediate threat.

## RTÉ Financials

RTÉ, as a public service broadcaster, is funded through a mix of licence fee revenues and commercial revenues which are obtained largely from advertising. Commercial income continues to decline primarily due to the rise of digital advertising on the social media platforms, Brexit uncertainty and the impact of COVID on advertising. Licence fee income has risen since 2016, however this has mainly been achieved through exchequer funding for TG4 and free licences, rather than organic growth in income from collection. The latter is

limited by the increasing number of “no TV” households and the increasing number of free TV licences.

Between 2008 and 2014 RTÉ reduced operating costs by €127m (c.30%). These reductions were achieved by tiered pay reductions, a pay freeze, content cuts (in-house and commissioned) and other efficiency savings. Despite this, with the exception of a small profit in 2014 and break even in 2015, operating losses continue to be recorded in most years.

. The total number of employees at year end 2018 was 1,822 which is 165 lower than in 2016. The reduction occurred in late 2017 and during 2018 as staff left under the voluntary exit programme launched in 2017. The target reduction under this scheme was between 200 and 300 staff. However, the take up was below expectations, at 160 staff.

RTÉ has a borrowing limit of €100m under the Broadcasting Act 2009. Total borrowings are €95m as of October 2019 so this, coupled with its challenging underlying financial position, means their ability to raise additional funding is restricted

## **RTÉ Strategic Response**

RTÉ wrote to the Department in November 2019 and stated that due to the seriousness of their financial situation they are proposing a revised strategy which includes a number of radical measures to cut costs and raise revenue.

These include:

### **Pay**

- A 15% reduction in the fees of top presenters from January 2020.
- RTÉ Board to waive fees.
- A payout of 10% for top executives.
- A pay freeze for other staff.
- Reducing headcount by a further 200 through voluntary redundancies and movement of NSO staff to National Concert Hall.
- Further work practice reforms.

### **Services**

- Closure of Aertel (requires statutory change).

- Closure of digital stations such as RTÉ Gold, RTE Choice, RTE Pulse, RTE 2XM, RTE Jr radio (this requires a formal application by RTÉ, a sectoral impact analysis by the BAI and Ministerial consent)
- More flexibility for advertising minutage (Ministerial consent has been sought and the BAI is currently analysing the sectoral impact of the proposed changes).

## Asset Disposal

- Sale of part of the Donnybrook campus (requires Ministerial consent).

There are a number of risks and challenges to delivering these measures including negotiated reforms, substantial industrial relations risks and timing risks linked to service closures and content cuts. In order to develop the proposals further, RTÉ engaged PWC to review its strategy. They are also currently engaging with the Unions regarding the reduced headcount, pay issues and workplace reforms. As detailed above, Ministerial consent will be required for a number of the measures proposed.

In the medium term, RTÉ has considered the sale of a further 9 acres of the Donnybrook campus, but has no plans to relocate entirely from Donnybrook. If the sale went ahead, most of the sale proceeds would be reinvested in new capital facilities on the site.

## NewERA Report and Findings

NewERA were asked to consider the financial implications of RTÉ's Revised Strategy from the State's viewpoint and prepare a report for the Minister and Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. The report outlined the ongoing financial position of RTÉ and challenges arising. NewERA concluded that there was a requirement for additional funding for 2020 and that as RTÉ would not be able to generate this from its commercial activities it would need to come from the Exchequer. Given the immediacy of the liquidity and solvency issues facing the RTÉ Group, NewERA considered that RTÉ should proceed with the revised Strategy as presented. NewERA also noted that the initiatives set out in the revised Strategy alone may not be sufficient to address the Group's financial issues.

## Response

In response to the revised Strategy the Government approved the following:

- The allocation of an additional €10m to TV Licence Funds in 2020 from the DEASP Household Benefits Package of which RTÉ will receive €9m with the balance allocated to the BAI Broadcasting Fund.

- A new reporting template to ensure that RTÉ delivers on its recovery strategy will be introduced which will be the focus of monthly meetings between officials from RTÉ, DCCA, DPER and NewERA. The Minister for CCAE and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform will be kept updated on the outcome of these meetings.
- A Commission on the Future of Irish Public Service Broadcasting, established by the Department of the Taoiseach, with membership to be decided (see full note below). The Government considered that in advance of the completion of this review, it would be premature to proceed with the future of the Donnybrook campus and therefore, consideration of any property disposal should be put on hold.

## Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis highlights more than ever the importance of public service broadcasting to our society. It is vital that the Irish public have a readily available, reliable source of information on COVID 19 and the measures being put in place to tackle the crisis.

RTÉ has suffered significant declines in both TV licence receipts and commercial income as a result of the crisis. There has been ongoing engagement with RTÉ in relation to the implementation of its revised strategy and the organisation is looking to identify where further savings might be realised. It is also engaging with NewEra (the advisory body to Government on commercial state owned enterprises) on the actions proposed to mitigate the financial impact of the crisis and a Report on the matter will be submitted to the Minister and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in the coming weeks.

In addition, like many businesses and organisations across Ireland, RTÉ is availing of the Government's COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme.

## Support for the Radio Sector

In light of the COVID-19 crisis, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) waived the broadcasting levy for the independent radio sector for quarters 1 and 2 2020 which will save the sector €1m. This waiver covers all independent radio at national regional and local level including community radio. The BAI has indicated they will seek Exchequer funding in 2020 or 2021 to mitigate some of the loss of the levy. Cashflow shortage from Q1 levy waiver is currently funded by loan drawdown.

The BAI is reporting monthly on the impact of these measures on independent radio and will keep the Minister updated on the financial well-being of the sector.

## **Sound and Vision Scheme 4**

In recognition of the important role of the community radio sector in informing the public about the COVID-19 pandemic the BAI also agreed to put in place a COVID-19 funding round under the Sound and Vision Scheme of €2.5m for commercial radio given their important role in awareness raising of COVID-19 at local level. 32 applications were received and assessed and the recommendations of the assessment were approved by the Authority on 21 May. On 6 June BAI announced that all applicants are to receive some funding and full details of the successful projects are being published on the BAI website.

This measure for commercial radio will be complemented by funding of €750,000 for the community radio sector over the summer.

There will be further rounds in 2020 for commercial television broadcasters and public service radio. BAI has implemented measures that will facilitate the payment of Sound & Vision funds in a timely and expedient manner and on an ongoing basis.

## **Sound and Vision 3**

The final round of Sound and Vision 3 was announced in March 2020 awarding just over €7m for 126 projects (€6.4m for 36 TV and €605k to 90 radio projects). The BAI is currently liaising with grantees to facilitate payments for pre-production and administrative work where the grantee is unable to start filming or recording. The first payments under this scheme commenced in May.

## **Commission on the Future of Irish Public Service Broadcasting**

The establishment of a Commission on the Future of Irish Public Service Broadcasting, was announced by the Department of the Taoiseach on 10 December 2019 with the President of Dublin City University, Professor Brian MacCraith, appointed as Chair of the new Commission on 14 January 2020.

The Commission's terms of reference are:

- To identify what the Irish experience has been in delivering the above aims through public service broadcasters and other media outlets at a local, regional and national level and the challenges created for these media by new global platforms and changing audience preferences in relation to how content is delivered;

- To consider the extent to which the current model of delivery is the appropriate one for the next 10 years;
- To review best practice in other comparable jurisdictions across the European Economic Area in terms of providing a future-proofed model for meeting the above four public services in light of changing audience expectations, in particular the preferences and behaviours of younger audiences.

Arising from that work, the Commission is tasked with:

- Proposing how those public service aims should be delivered in Ireland over the next ten years;
- Distinguishing how this should contribute to supporting Ireland's cultural and creative sectors;
- How this work can be funded in a way that is sustainable, gives security of funding, ensures independent editorial oversight and delivers value for money to the public;
- Making recommendations on RTÉ's role, financing and structure within this framework;
- Asserting how this is overseen and regulated, having regard to our EU obligations including the requirements of the revised AudioVisual Media Services Directive.

Membership of the Commission, other than the Chairperson, has not yet been decided.

# Management and Tendering of TV Licence Collection

Since their lowest point in 2012, TV licence sales have gradually improved year on year with direct sales in 2019 of 1,025,534 licences. The system is not without its challenges however with the current evasion rate estimated be 12.83%. While this rate has fallen from 15.25% at the end of 2014, it is still at an unacceptable level considering its UK counterpart has an evasion rate of 7%. Evasion equates to a loss of up to €33.7m per annum to public service broadcasting in Ireland. In addition to evasion, the number of households required to have a licence under current legislation is declining due to a departure from traditional viewing habits, with recent TAM (television audience measurement) estimates suggesting that approximately 10% of homes do not have a traditional TV.

Total TV Licence receipts in 2019 were €222.72m consisting of €162.8.54m in direct sales and a €59.9m contribution from DEASP for free TV licences issued under the household benefits package. Out of the total TV licence receipts received by the Department in 2019 RTÉ received €196.54m, An Post €11.38m and the Broadcasting Fund €14.79m. The Fund is administered by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) which receives 7% of licence fee funds to support an archiving scheme and the independent production of high quality indigenous content based on Irish culture and language.

An average of 455,439 free TV licences were recorded on the DEASP database for 2019. It was decided as part of Budget 2020 that DEASP will increase their annual contribution by €10m. This will benefit both RTÉ and the Broadcasting Fund. RTÉ will gain approximately €9m additional public funding as a result of this in 2020.

## TV Licence Reform

In their report published in November 2017, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment recommended the replacement of the TV licence with a broadcasting charge to be collected by Revenue. In response the Working Group on the Future Funding of Public Service Broadcasting was set up in July 2018 to examine options for the future funding of Public Service broadcasting.

The key recommendations of the working group report were:

- That the TV licence be put out to public tender as soon as enabling legislation is enacted. It will be necessary to offer a fixed term contract of 5 years in order to make it feasible for the successful tender to invest in the database and collection improvements;
- That at the end of the contract period, the licence fee should be replaced by a device-independent charge to support public service content on a sustainable basis.

In response the Government accepted these recommendations.

The rationale for not immediately introducing a device independent charge included a number of issues with the option of a Broadcasting Charge collected by Revenue, including:

- Gaining public acceptability for a new charge;
- The charge would be focused on households so a different mechanism would be required for commercial premises;
- If Revenue was to collect the Broadcasting Charge with local property tax (LPT) as had been suggested, there is the issue of LPT being based on property ownership while the occupier is liable under the current TV licence collection/ proposed Broadcasting Charge. These populations are significantly different.
- Social Housing Associations and Local Authorities would be liable for the Charge and would need to organise collection of it from their tenants;

Due to these issues and the critical financial situation of the public service broadcasters it was decided that an interim measure was needed in order to immediately address the issue and reduce the evasion rate. In addition, a fixed term contract of 5 years would make it feasible for the successful tender to invest in the TV Licence collection database and associated collection improvements.

## Broadcasting Bill 2019

The publication of the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2019 was approved in June 2019.

The proposed amendments to the Broadcasting Act 2009 will allow for the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) to be part funded up to a maximum of 50% from TV licence receipts. It is intended that any consequent reductions in broadcasting levy contributions would be applied 'across the board' by the BAI so that all broadcasters would benefit in equal proportion from the measure. It is proposed that doing this will provide scope to exempt smaller community radio stations from the broadcasting levy altogether. The Bill allows for the Minister to decide what percentage of the levy to fund from TV Licence Receipts.

In addition, the Bill will allow the BAI to accrue a level of working capital to meet its day to day expenses without the need to pursue a costly and burdensome borrowing facility and grant authority to the BAI to determine exemptions and deferrals to the levy depending on the qualifying income of individual broadcasters and the level of regulation they require.

It will give the BAI greater flexibility regarding which broadcasters are covered by the levy and to what extent. This will create a legislative environment by which new broadcasters, including for example, any that might wish to relocate to the State after Brexit, can be levied appropriately in terms of contributing to the cost of their regulation. A small number of broadcasters have relocated EU services to Ireland already in light of Brexit, the main ones being SIS (Sports Information Services) and SSBL (who operate FreeSports). The BAI have licensed 4 section 71 contracts in the past 10 months.

The Bill also addresses a gap in the existing legislation whereby the holder (of the section 70 contract) is exempted from the requirement to apply for a licence for any additional services it chooses to offer. It seeks to ensure that any new services could not operate on an unregulated basis and clarifies that they would require a Section 71 licence.

In order to further support community and local radio the Bill will allow for the creation of a new funding scheme that would permit the granting of bursaries to journalists in these stations, which are the starting point for many journalists' careers. It is intended that circa €500,000 would be made available by the BAI that would support 20 annual bursaries of €25,000 each.

The Bill completed second stage in the Dáil on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2019.

## TG4

TG4's five year strategy seeks to extend its national reach while also meeting the needs of its core audience.

In contrast with RTÉ, TG4 can rely on significantly more predictable income streams. It is less dependent on commercial revenue and is fully exchequer funded since 2019 which protects from the impact of licence fee variations. TG4 will receive €34.2m current and €3m capital in exchequer funding in 2020. A revision of its accounting rules means that some content can be funded through capital funding.

As a publisher broadcaster TG4 relies to a greater extent on independent production of content and, as such, it retains more control over its cost base. While TG4 carries no debt and does not run deficits, it has, however, been constrained in its capacity to grow audience share due to financial limitations. Financial constraints also mean TG4 is less able to prepare for future challenges such as the need for increased online content.

The BAI 5 year review published in 2018 recommended an increase of €6 million in public funding to TG4 over its 2017 funding. In 2018, TG4 was allocated an additional €2m ongoing exchequer funding, comprising €1m current and €1m capital funding. In 2019, TG4 was allocated €443,000 in new Exchequer funding and in the Revised Estimates for 2020; TG4 has been allocated an additional €1m capital funding. This gives a combined total of €3.443m of the €6m recommendation that TG4 has received in ongoing additional public funding since 2017.

# Broadcasting Fund and the Independent Production Sector

## Broadcasting Fund

The Broadcasting Act 2009 provides that 7% of net television licence fee receipts are payable into the Broadcasting Funding Scheme. The fund, which is administered by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI), operates the Sound and Vision and Archiving Schemes.

€12m was allocated to 196 Radio and 60 Television projects in 2018 while €2m was awarded to 6 projects from the Archiving Scheme. The schemes are open to independent producers and all broadcasters.

## Investment in the Independent Production Sector

### RTÉ

The Broadcasting Act 2009 requires RTÉ to make specific amounts available each year for the commissioning of television and radio programmes from the independent production sector.

The actual amount incurred on independent productions in 2018 was €40.1 million, broken down as follows: €38.9 million (Television) and €1.2 million (Radio). A further €0.2m was incurred by RTÉ on non-statutory, independent produced television programmes, resulting in a total spend of €40.3m incurred on commissioned programmes.

A total of 595 hours (167 radio, 428 television) were commissioned across a range of categories. Overall, expenditure for 2018 remains 3% higher than the statutory requirement of €39.7m.

### TG4

TG4 as a publisher broadcaster commissions content from the independent production sector and spent €27m or 77% of their exchequer funding in 2018 in the independent production sector.

## Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill

The proposed Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill brings together a number of initiatives, including the transposition of the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive and certain actions from the Action Plan for Online Safety 2018-2019

Broadly speaking, the proposed Bill would:

- Establish a Media Commission which will have all the present functions of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland;
- Dissolve the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland;
- Transpose the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive, including those provisions of the Directive relating to the regulation of video sharing platform services;
- Establish a framework for the regulation of online safety to address the proliferation of harmful online content, encompassing the regulation of video sharing platform services, to be administered by an Online Safety Commissioner as part of the Media Commission;
- Establish a framework for the regulation of on-demand audiovisual media services to be administered by the Media Commission;
- Provide the Media Commission with appropriate compliance powers, including the power to issue information requests, initiate authorised officer led investigations and to audit the complaint or issues handling mechanisms operated by online services; and
- Provide the Media Commission with appropriate sanction powers, subject to court oversight, including administrative financial sanctions, the power to compel compliance and the power to block online services.

The General Scheme of the Bill was referred to the Office of the Attorney General for detailed drafting in January 2020. The Bill transposes the Audiovisual Media Services Directive which has a due date of September 2020.

### Audiovisual Media Services Directive

The current version of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive was agreed in 2008 and contains rules and requirements that form the minimum standards that television

broadcasting services and on-demand audiovisual media services must follow in the EU. Such services include the RTÉ player, Netflix and Now TV.

The revised Directive includes, for the first time specific rules and requirements for video sharing platform services such as YouTube. The revised Directive takes a principles based approach and requires member states to ensure that video sharing platform services take appropriate measures to protect minors from harmful content and all users from hate speech and certain criminal content. The approach set out in the Directive is therefore systemic in nature and the role of national regulators is to ensure that the measures taken by video sharing platforms are adequate in practice to address these requirements.

The revised Directive will require the regulation of any video sharing platform service established in Ireland for the entirety of the European Union. This is likely to include very well-known and large online services such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.

## **Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill – Summary of Key Provisions**

### **Establishment of the Media Commission**

In order to implement the measures required under AVMSD and the online safety proposals, it is considered that a new regulatory structure is required to accommodate the multiple strands of regulation. Accordingly, the BAI and its Statutory Committees will be dissolved and replaced by a multi-person Media Commission.

Given the significantly expanded remit of the proposed Media Commission, it is proposed that a single regulator encompassing all of the areas covered by the Directive, and which has dedicated Commissioners for each of the strands, represents the most fit-for-purpose solution into the future.

It is proposed that the Commission be assigned a range of functions including:

- To promote and protect the interests of the public in relation to online, audio-visual and audio content;
- To prepare and make codes and rules to be observed by entities operating designated online services, audiovisual media services and sound media services;
- To prepare and submit proposals to the Minister for a scheme or schemes for the granting of funds to support the production of audio-visual content and sound broadcasting content;

- To engage in public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives in relation to online safety and media literacy;
- To impose a levy on regulated media services and designated online services in order to ensure it is sufficiently resourced to properly execute its statutory functions.

The Commission will comprise an Executive Chairperson and between 3 and 6 additional members, to be appointed by Government following a competition by the Public Appointments Service. It is envisaged that initially, the Executive Chairperson and 3 Commissioners will be appointed. However, given the rapidly changing media and online landscape, it is considered prudent to make provision for additional Commissioners in the legislation. This will give the Regulator more flexibility as the policy environment evolves. The Executive Chairperson will lead the organisation and will ultimately be responsible for the general management, staffing, governance and control of the activities of the Commission.

Furthermore, one of the appointees will serve as the Online Safety Commissioner. This will meet the public and political expectation that there should be a specific role in this regard, given the public and political focus on online safety issues. The other two members of the Commission will be assigned areas of responsibility in respect of the other functions of the Commission, primarily broadcasting, on-demand services, research and education, media mergers etc.

## **Regulatory Framework for Online Safety**

It is not proposed to provide for a definition of harmful online content. Rather the approach taken is to enumerate a non-exhaustive number of defined categories of content which are considered to be harmful online content.

The Bill provides for a number of categories of harmful online content, covering:

- Material which it is a criminal offence to disseminate under Irish or Union law,
- Cyberbullying material pertaining to any person and on any grounds, e.g. homophobia, transphobia, racism,
- Material which is likely to promote or encourage eating disorders, and,
- Material which is likely to promote or encourage self-harm or suicide or provides instructions on how to do so and where said material is not part of philosophical, political or medical discourse.

It is important to note that the reference to criminal material covers all such offences and any such offences that may be created in the future. The Bill does not propose that the Media Commission will have any role in prosecuting individuals for criminal activities. That role will remain appropriately with An Garda Síochána and the Director for Public Prosecutions. The role of the Commission will be to regulate designated online services which facilitate the dissemination of or access to such content.

The purpose of these categories of harmful online content is to inform the drafting of online safety codes, by the Online Safety Commissioner and the assessment of the compliance of regulated online services with those codes.

The Bill provides a definition of age-inappropriate online content. This definition is provided for as it is considered that there are a number of categories of materials that may not necessarily be harmful in and of themselves but which may be inappropriate for a minor to be exposed to, including gross and gratuitous violence and pornography. It is intended that this definition will facilitate the Online Safety Commissioner in issuing online safety guidance materials in relation to content rating, age-gating and parental controls. It will also provide a regulatory sandbox where new approaches to protecting children online can be tested out and, where successful, these may migrate to online safety codes.

## **Making of Online Safety Codes**

The Bill provides for the Online Safety Commissioner to make online safety codes which would develop, in the first instance, high level principle based codes governing standards and practices. Designated online services would then be required to develop measures to meet the principles set out in the online safety codes that apply to them. The Online Safety Commissioner can then assess whether these measures are working in practice through requiring impact assessment, issuing information requests, and undertaking investigations and audits. On this basis the Commissioner can then issue directions, through compliance and warning notices, to designated online services mandating them to take specific steps to improve their compliance. This will allow the Online Safety Commissioner, through learned experience, to develop more detailed and tailored online safety codes in certain discrete areas as standardised best practices emerge.

It is important to note that this will provide for a quasi-continuous process of improving measures taken by online services to meet the requirements of the online safety codes through ongoing engagement and assessment by the Online Safety Commissioner.

# Online Safety Initiatives

## Action Plan for Online Safety

The Action Plan for Online Safety was launched in July 2018. The Action Plan was drawn up following engagement with a wide range of stakeholders and is currently being implemented by a Sponsor's Group made up of 6 key government departments (DCCAE, the Departments of Justice and Equality; Education and Skills; Children and Youth Affairs; Health; and Business, Enterprise and Innovation) and chaired by the Department of Education & Skills.

The Action Plan sets out 5 goals and 25 targeted actions to be implemented over an 18-month period. It seeks to balance the opportunities and benefits provided by the internet with the need to ensure that people are informed and supported to deal with online risks.

Two key actions assigned to DCCAE by the Action Plan relate to developing a Government response to the issues raised by the Digital Safety Commissioner Bill 2017 i.e. the regulation of harmful online content (Action 18), and the transposition of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (Action 17). DCCAE was also assigned responsibility for the establishment of the National Advisory Council for Online Safety (Action 20).

The Sponsor's Group published its final progress report on this Action Plan recently. The development of a follow-up Action Plan is currently under consideration by the Departments involved.

## National Advisory Council on Online Safety

In line with the Action Plan for Online Safety, a National Advisory Council for Online Safety was established. This Council has, to date, been chaired by the Minister of State for Community Development, Natural Resources and Digital Development. The Council has a core membership of 20, which includes representatives from children's and parents' organisations, major online platforms, Government Departments and experts on online safety issues. The Secretariat to the Council is provided by DCCAE.

The role of the Council is to:

- Provide advice to Government on online safety issues,
- Identify emerging issues where Government intervention might be needed,
- Help in the creation of clear and easy to understand online safety guidance materials for all internet users, and,

- Examine national and international research and communicate key findings to Government, stakeholders and the wider public.

The Council, supported by DCCAE, is pursuing a primary research project in order to ensure that up-to-date information is available to inform policy debate, to identify trends and assist in prioritising issues for attention.

The project comprises three nationally representative surveys. The target audiences for these surveys are adults (18+), children (9-17) and the parents, guardians or caregivers of those children. The data will be collected via face-to-face interviews. The objectives of the research are to:

- Describe the demographic profile of internet users in Ireland;
- Determine how all internet users in Ireland use and access the internet, and the level of their digital skills;
- Estimate the prevalence of online risks and abuse experienced by internet users;
- Identify opportunities and benefits obtained through the use of the internet;
- Identify safety practices of adults and children when using the internet; and
- Identify how parents mediate in the use of internet by their children.

The survey is currently being carried out by IPSOS-MRBI, with the raw data collected expected to be available in the second quarter of 2020. An analysis of the data will then take place.

## **Other Online Safety Initiatives Being Undertaken by Various Government Departments**

The proposed Bill is not a standalone measure but rather one element in a range of targeted Government initiatives relating to online regulation, including:

- The proposed Electoral Commission (Dept of Housing, Planning and Local Government)
- The regulation of the transparency of online political advertising
- The proposed Gambling Regulator (Dept. of Justice and Equality)
- The review of the Defamation Act (Dept. of Justice and Equality)

- The private members Bill which has been supported by Government on Online Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill (Dept. of Justice and Equality)
- The review of the Incitement to Hatred Act (Dept. of Justice and Equality)
- The review to assess the potential for introducing Hate Crime legislation (Dept. of Justice and Equality)