

STATEMENT FROM JOHN PURCELL, CHAIRMAN, Independent Broadcasters of Ireland

To Joint Oireachtas Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media

Thursday November 24th 2022

[Check Against Delivery]

Thank you for the invitation to attend here today.

I am delighted to be joined by some colleagues representing local, regional and national stations all of whom are members of IBI. These are:

Fionnuala Rabbitt, Chief Executive of Highland Radio in Donegal

Kieran McGearey – Station Director of Cork's 96 and C103

Simon Myciunka, Chief Executive of Bauer Media Ireland whose stations include NewsTalk and Today FM

Gabrielle Cummins, Chief Executive of Beat 102 103 in the South East

Jerry O Sullivan, presenter of Kerry Today on Radio Kerry

I am also delighted that we are joined by Teresa Hanratty who is the Project Manager of Learning Waves the independent radio industry training body which is funded by Skillnet and through which our stations provide training, professional development and are developing innovative programmes to address important issues including equality, diversity and inclusivity on air and in our companies.

And later Ronan McManamy who is Chief Executive of both Clare FM and Tipp FM, two long established local stations will speak to you.

As well as being Chair of IBI, I am also Chief Executive of KCLR which covers Kilkenny and Carlow. So you are joined here today by radio people from North South, East and West.

I have circulated some information which includes the list of member stations of IBI which includes every commercially licensed local, regional and national radio station in the country as well as information regarding listenership and trust in our medium.

All this points to the fact that radio is immensely popular and resilient medium in Ireland – each week 3.1 million people tune to the stations we represent.

The success of radio should be celebrated. Not everyone is stuck to social media every day and the facts about media consumption may surprise you.

Recent research undertaken by IPSOS MRBI gives an interesting insight into weekly Irish media consumption:

- 78% of the population listen to Radio
- 34% spend time on Facebook
- 30% are on Instagram

12% are on Tik Tok
10% of the population use Twitter

The average amount of time spent listening to radio everyday by radio listeners is 4.3 hours

Despite our success in listenership terms we are not at all complacent and recognise the challenges that we face in retaining and growing our listenership particularly among younger demographics.

We believe that the industry is performing better than it is often given credit for and this is an area in which we very much see “the glass as half full” rather than being “half empty”!

The debate regarding the future shape and viability of the media sector in Ireland is a very important one and it is not some abstract concept of concern in the medium to long term.

While audience figures are truly impressive the business pressures are immense.

Radio operators face immediate challenges and though the sector weathered the storm created by Covid far better than anyone could have hoped, no one can be complacent. My colleague Ronan McManamy will talk to you in some more detail about his experiences in the local stations which he runs and how he views the future and the challenges particularly to news and current affairs coverage and how support is essential. This is a very serious issue.

This issue and the debate about the future of media and radio in particular is about an awful lot more than the jobs of the approximately 1600 people who work in our sector, it is huge importance to our society, our democracy, our culture and by extension to our economy.

What I hope to cover here today:

1. What the pandemic taught us
2. Implementation of recommendations of Future of Media Commission
3. The current Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill
4. Importance of equity of treatment in regulation of broadcast and online media
5. Our role into the future in developing a better Ireland

The Pandemic

The pandemic was a crisis for Irish society and throughout it Irish radio proved its importance and value.

We were only enabled to continue in operation through Government support for which we are grateful.

For many years IBI argued for acceptance of critical public service nature of independent radio and establishment of a fund to support news and current affairs

This principle was accepted both in the enactment of the Covid Sound and Vision and in the recommendations of the Future of Media Commission report.

How radio was supported during the pandemic provides some lessons which we feel will be useful for future positive development of our sector.

It is essential that in designing future schemes:

- An appropriate element of the funding is ring fenced element for independent radio
- The schemes are designed to fit the programming which serves the needs and interests of the audiences we serve and support the programming they currently want
- It can support live programming
- The issue of additionality – which has always been a bug bear of our sector is eliminated
- The schemes are practical and user friendly and suit our industry and while ensuring transparency and accountability they are practical and feasible

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues in further detail

Online Safety and Media Regulation

This is obviously occupying a lot of current attention. I would like to use this opportunity to thank the public representatives here and the general members of the Oireachtas and Government for their engagement and expressions of support

We understand progress has been achieved in relation to: the Journalism bursary; Flexibility in advertising scheduling; Recognition of importance of broadcasting in future landscape. These are modest but welcome measures.

Progress on levy which in itself is a very modest “ask” remains outstanding and unless action is taken soon, the situation regarding how the new regulator is funded next year will be very unfair.

Next year once the new Media Commission is established, as it stands radio stations will continue to pay the costs of the regulator while the regulation of Online and Social Media which will also be covered by the same regulation will be paid for by the Exchequer.

So the costs of regulating my station KCLR will be borne by KCLR.

Meanwhile the cost of starting to bring some of the largest and most powerful companies in the world under regulation will be paid for by The Exchequer!

This is a glaring injustice and unfair. We hope that it can be remedied before it is too late and that the levy is suspended for the coming year.

In relation to the long term future of the levy, we fully understand the principles involved, however we believe that as the levy has been waived for the Community Sector based on their ethos and role, the same should be done for the independent sector. Where there is a will – and we have been told by politicians of all parties that there is – there is a way!

Equity of Treatment of Regulation

While you have heard our frustration in relation to the levy and our concerns re the complexity and applicability of future funding schemes, the OSMR Bill is an important step forward in relation to bringing online and social media companies into line with other so called “mainstream media”.

However we have concerns that despite the best intentions, our sector will continue to be restricted by regulation in some areas while other media will still continue to push the boundaries of what we all know should not be acceptable.

We feel that appropriate regulation and sensible and equitable regulation across all media is essential and will be an ongoing project requiring ongoing political engagement

It is our hope that the new regulator across so called traditional broadcasters and now online and social media platforms will move towards rapidly ensuring that there is appropriate regulation for all sorts of media companies – not just so called “mainstream media”.

Radio’s Role in the future in developing a better Ireland

I feel something like a broken record in relation to many of these issues. But we have to keep repeating them until we achieve progress.

But ultimately what people in radio are most concerned about is at the core of what we do every day and what makes our medium and our stations so popular.

Independent radio wants to continue to play an important role in Irish life, culture and society through maintaining, positively developing and expanding our services and platforms to new audiences in new ways.

We are willing to play an active part in meeting the challenges that face our society: climate change; the need to better reflect a changing Ireland through positive change in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion.

But to do so, we need new ways of thinking; we need support and we need to be able to invest. Like any other industry – like the IT sector, like the newspaper sector, like the agricultural sector and even the online and social media sector - we need the appropriate support from the State to continue to survive, grow and develop.

Thank you. We look forward to discussing the issues with you.