

The Digital Networks Act – securing Europe’s digital future

The Digital Networks Act is Europe’s chance to restore competitiveness, deliver investment and innovation, and secure inclusive growth – and Ireland has a key role to play.

Connectivity is the backbone of modern economies, underpinning innovation, productivity, and growth. For Ireland, advanced digital networks are critical to sustaining our position as a leading tech hub and enabling regional development.

Advanced digital networks – including 5G Standalone – are essential for real-time, data-driven services that touch every sector, from smart manufacturing and e-health to AI and quantum computing. These technologies will power Ireland’s ambitions in areas like smart agriculture, connected healthcare, and digital public services, aligning with the Government’s November 2025 Digital Public Services Plan, which sets out Ireland’s roadmap to fully digitalise key public services by 2030.

Yet, Europe’s digital competitiveness continues to lag global peers and Ireland is not immune. It is hampered by fragmented regulation, chronic underinvestment, and an unbalanced digital ecosystem that favours global tech giants over European operators.

The current regulatory framework for connectivity is too complex and intrusive, stifling the rollout of secure, modern networks.

This not only undermines economic growth but also threatens national security and democratic stability.

The time for decisive action is now.

The Digital Networks Act (DNA) is Europe’s opportunity to reverse decline and support Europe’s ambition to reclaim its digital leadership – and Ireland can help shape this future.

To secure Europe’s technological future and with so much at stake, policymakers must ensure the DNA delivers in three key areas:

1. Unlocking the digital single market

Europe’s single market is its greatest strategic asset. A truly integrated digital single market could unlock €415 billion annually and create hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Spectrum policy must evolve to support long-term investment. Today, uncertainty around licence durations and rollout rules makes it difficult for telecom providers to plan and invest with confidence. Reform is needed — particularly through longer spectrum licence terms that align with investment cycles and provide stability for operators. At the same time, greater consistency in rollout principles across Member States would enable cross-border services, accelerate next-generation network rollouts, and strengthen Europe’s bargaining power globally.

Delaying single market completion means missing out on significant productivity gains and job creation, while leaving Europe – and Ireland - behind on cost, speed, and innovation.

Action: Align with EU best practice by ensuring certainty on the spectrum licensing framework, reducing deployment costs and enabling innovation and delivery of EU wide cross border services.

Action: Harmonise satellite service authorisation to allow pan-European satellite connectivity operations, especially in emergencies and in rural areas.

2. Same rules for same services

Europe must modernise its digital framework to ensure fairness and competition. If two services perform the same function, they should be subject to the same rules.

But current asymmetries means that telecoms companies in Ireland investing heavily in connectivity infrastructure, face stricter obligations than digital platforms. This distorts competition and weakens infrastructure resilience.

Until Europe addresses this, it risks ceding control of its digital infrastructure to global rivals, undermining both competitiveness and user protection.

Action: Recast the outdated Open Internet Regulation (OIR) to enable innovation and fair competition. Designed for a different era, updating the OIR would allow operators to innovate while maintaining fairness and transparency

Action: Bring digital service providers into the scope of interconnection obligations and dispute resolution mechanisms.

3. Simpler regulation that unleashes innovation

Europe's digital infrastructure is constrained by regulatory complexity. Overlapping rules and inconsistent enforcement deter investment and slow innovation.

This must be simplified. If Europe can eliminate duplication and modernise obsolete frameworks designed for a different time and for basic telephony services, it can build a competitive, resilient digital ecosystem.

But failing to act will just widen the connectivity gap, especially for people living in rural areas. And it could drive innovative firms and their investors out of Europe.

Action: Remove outdated obligations like the Universal Service Obligation and streamline end-user rights regulation.

Action: Repeal the fragmented e-Privacy Directive and integrate its provisions into the DNA to improve clarity and effectiveness.

Reframing regulation for sustainable growth

More widely, the DNA must focus on enabling investment competition and completing the deployment of very high-capacity networks.

Regulation should remain only where competition challenges persist. The preference should be for upstream remedies and strict rules on dominant players during the migration to fibre.

Europe must avoid re-monopolisation and ensure sustainable competition and inclusive infrastructure rollout.

The Digital Networks Act is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to secure Europe's digital leadership — and Ireland has a pivotal role to play. As the Government's Digital Public Services Plan 2030 sets out a bold roadmap to fully digitalise key public services, and with an ambitious updated Digital and AI Strategy expected in the coming months, Ireland is positioning itself at the forefront of digital transformation.

Vodafone Ireland is committed to delivering the advanced connectivity that will make these ambitions a reality. From accelerating 5G Standalone deployment to expanding high-capacity fibre networks, we're investing in the infrastructure that will power Ireland's digital economy, drive regional growth, and enable inclusive access for all.

Now is the time for action. Together, we can ensure Ireland leads in connectivity, innovation, and digital public services.