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NORTHERN IRELAND TOPS UK'S BROADBAND GROWTH LEAGUE

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Northern Ireland was the UK's fastest growing broadband nation, up by 78% during 2006, according to new Ofcom research published today.

In its Communications Market Report for Northern Ireland Ofcom examines availability, take-up and usage of internet, telecommunications and broadcasting services. It compares findings across Northern Ireland with those in Wales, Scotland and the nine English Regions.

This is the second time Ofcom has undertaken such research in Northern Ireland. Last year's report showed significant differences, particularly in take-up levels of broadband and digital television, both between the nations and also between those living in urban and rural areas. This year's report shows those gaps are closing. In 2005 there was a twelve percentage point gap between the number of adults with broadband at home in Northern Ireland (lowest at 24%), Wales (25%), Scotland (31%) and England (highest at 36%). Today's report shows that by 2006 this gap had reduced to three percentage points. Take-up in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland stood at 42% and in England had reached 45% making Northern Ireland the fastest growing broadband nation.

In 2005 the gap between the nations in terms of digital television take-up was even larger at 19 percentage points (Wales highest at 72%, England at 66%, Scotland at 60% and NI lowest at 53%). By 2006 this gap had reduced to 13 percentage points (Wales at 82%, England at 75%, Scotland at 76% and NI at 69%). Digital television take-up grew faster in Northern Ireland than in any other UK nation during the year.

INADVERTENT ROAMING COSTS CONSUMERS UP TO £11M

The report also includes research into the problem of inadvertent mobile roaming in Northern Ireland. This is where mobile phone users in the border regions pick up a signal from mobile networks in the Republic at added expense to consumers. The research shows that an estimated 74% of users in the border regions (approximately 105,000 people) experience this problem. The survey found that a third of those experience it daily. Based on this research, Ofcom estimates that 10 million calls per year are made whilst inadvertently roaming at an estimated extra cost to consumers of £10.9m per year (based on an average call length of 2 minutes). This means that the problem may cost the 105,000 people living in affected areas as much as an extra £100 a year each on their mobile phone bills.

An estimated 85% of those people affected were aware of the problem but 80% were not aware of how they could avoid additional costs such as requesting special network tariffs from their operators (just 7% of those in affected areas have done this) or locking their phone onto just one network.

Some operators have already introduced new tariffs to alleviate this problem. Ofcom will continue to work with all mobile phone operators to raise consumers' awareness of how they can avoid unnecessary additional costs.

KEY FINDINGS ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND

INTERNET AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS

- People in Northern Ireland spend more each month on their mobile phone services (£23.97) than any other nation (UK average £21.09). At £20.57, people in Northern Ireland also spend more than the UK average on their landline phone (UK average £17.75).
- More people in Northern Ireland (32%) take multiple telecoms services from a single communications supplier (such as fixed line telephone and broadband) than in any other UK nation. The UK average is 29%. Growth in bundling has been fuelled by growing broadband take-up and increasing levels of local loop unbundling.
- People in Northern Ireland can now receive more competitive broadband and phone services through the growth in local loop unbundling (LLU). The number of people able to receive LLU services increased from 0% in 2005 to 10% in 2006 in Northern Ireland.
- 3G mobile phone coverage was lowest in Northern Ireland where just 59% of the population had at least one operator available to them. The UK average was 91%.

BROADCASTING

- People in Northern Ireland watch the least television in the UK (3.3 hours per day). People in Scotland watch the most at 4.1 hours per day. Viewing of television has fallen further in Northern Ireland (by 12%) over the four years to 2006 than in any other nation (UK average 2.3%).
- In all nations except Northern Ireland viewers spend more time watching BBC local television news than ITV. In Northern Ireland UTV has a 37% share compared to the BBC's 27%.
- The radio market was more concentrated in Northern Ireland in 2006 than in the other nation. The top three radio groups in Northern Ireland account for 90% of the entire market whereas in England the top three account for 47%, in Scotland 49%, and in Wales 76%.
- BBC local radio share of listeners in Northern Ireland was the highest of any nation, at 27% compared to the UK average of 11%.
- Ownership of DAB digital radio was lowest in Northern Ireland (11% of households in 2006), and highest in England at 19% of homes, followed by Scotland and Wales, both at 14%.

Ofcom Chief Executive Ed Richards said: "The geographic gap between the digital haves and have-nots in the UK has been gradually narrowing, but we need to do more to ensure that everyone is able to benefit from the economic and social benefits modern communications offer."

Denis Wolinski, Director of Ofcom Northern Ireland, said: "Last year Northern Ireland trailed on broadband and digital TV take-up. In the past year we have made great strides forward and have become the fastest growing broadband nation in the UK."

Ofcom is today also publishing a UK-wide report and other supplementary reports for Scotland, Wales and the English Regions. The full text of all reports can be found at: <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/cm/cm07/>

Ends.

NOTES FOR EDITORS AND CSEs

1. Ofcom is the independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industries, with responsibilities across television, radio, telecommunications and wireless communications services.

For further details please visit www.ofcom.org.uk.

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