

DRAFT

First Report of Information Society Commission

Introduction

When the Information Society Steering Committee produced their Report in March of this year they recognised "the speed and scale of the revolution now underway" and highlighted the necessity that "Ireland responds with urgency to the challenges that lie ahead".

The appointment by Government of the Information Society Commission in May resulted from a recommendation contained in this report and was a recognition by Government that urgent action is needed to ensure Ireland's success in the Information Society.

The ultimate aim is to achieve the vision set out by the Steering Committee to ensure that:

- Ireland is a unique community, rich in culture, learning and creativity where the Information Society is embraced;
- to support the talents of our people;
- to create employment, wealth and vibrant inclusive communities;
- and where citizens participate more actively in government.

It quickly became clear to the Information Society Commission that developments in information and Communications Technology are taking place at an increasingly rapid pace which brings the urgency of moving forward quickly on a coherent national strategy into ever sharper focus.

Under its Terms of Reference, the Information Society Commission is mandated to report to Government on an annual basis. Although the Commission has only been in operation since May of this year it has become clear that priority action is needed in certain key areas. For this reason, the Commission is presenting its first report to Government within the first eight months of its establishment.

The principal objectives of this Report are:

- to note progress since the publication of the Steering Committee Report
- to set a context for the work of the Information Society Commission
- to set short-term goals for the Commission
- to highlight areas where urgent action is required.

About the Information Society Commission

One of the principal recommendations of the Steering Committee's Report was that an Information Society Commission be established under the aegis of the Department of the Taoiseach to direct the strategy for the creation of an Information Society in Ireland and to address key issues in the following areas:

Awareness
Infrastructure
Learning
Enterprise
Government

In recognition of the importance of the Information Society, the Government responded quickly to the Steering Committee Report and appointed the Information Society Commission on 9 May. The membership of the Commission is comprised of high profile people from industry and the social partners (see appendix x) and its reports are submitted directly to the Taoiseach.

Support for the appointment of the Information Society Commission and its aims and objectives has been clearly demonstrated at a political level.

[There will be a section here with Quotations from Recent Speeches by Taoiseach and Government Ministers.]

A full-time Secretariat has been provided by the Department of the Taoiseach to run the offices of the Information Society Commission. A Director to the Commission has also been appointed to represent the Commission at Conferences and other public events concerning the Information Society. He is also assisting the Commission with their overall strategies and work programme.

The Commission is mandated to drive initiatives across all sectors of the economy to stimulate investment in new computer and technology facilities. It has also been asked to ensure that the benefits of the Information Society are spread throughout society and not just aimed at those who can afford to purchase the technology themselves.

The work of this Commission takes place in the run-up to the new Millennium celebrations and will stimulate large-scale investment and improvements in technology throughout the country in education, business, the public sector and in ordinary households.

Key Developments Since the Publication of the Steering Committee Report

The Report of the Steering Committee identified the next steps required to translate strategy into action. Even in the short time since the publication of this Report there have been significant developments.

The appointment of the Information Society Commission has been in itself an important step forward in addressing the issues outlined by the Steering Committee. Already, significant progress has taken place on a broad range of initiatives that were either recommended by, or referred to, in the Steering Committee Report.

Some developments are worthy of particular mention at this point, essentially as a means of illustrating the speed at which change is taking place.

Awareness

Ennis was the hardworking town that won the mantle of Telecom Eireann's Information Age Town against stiff opposition from 45 other towns.

This competition has been an outstanding example of how the enthusiasm and imagination of local communities can be captured by developments in information and communications technology.

As a follow-up to the Competition, Telecom Eireann are also organising an Information Age Town Alliance to provide a forum for sharing with all the entrant towns the ongoing results of the Information Age Town pilot. Other projects such as the Information Age Town Intranet will also build on the success of the Project.

Infrastructure

Appointment of Telecommunications Regulator

The Information Society Commission is pleased to note that Ms Etain Doyle was appointed as Telecommunications Regulator with effect from 30 June. The functions of the Director are broadly in line with those recommended in the Steering Committee Report.

The Commission believes that the establishment of this Office is an important step towards to the creation of a fully competitive telecommunications market in Ireland.

Broadband

Upon the establishment of the Information Society Commission, the Government asked the Commission to "Assist in the identification of 22 areas around the country to be designated for broadband." However, given that the market in

this area has developed in the intervening period the need to actually pick areas specially for broadband access may have been overtaken by events.

The Report recommended a phased roll-out programme which could ultimately connect up to 20,000 Irish enterprises via optical fibre to the telecommunications system.

These recommendations have been rather overtaken by investment in broadband by Telecom Eireann and the independent telecommunications service providers. Telecom Eireann has commenced a roll out of fibre to provide bandwidth targeting in the first instance specific niches of the market. The company is planning to offer commercial ATM services during the second half of 1998.

Since the deregulation of the provision of alternative infrastructure came into effect on 1 July, Esat has commenced building a fibre optic network in every city and major town in the country. They also have in place an 18 month roll-out schedule for over 2000 route miles of fibre network. Esat also plans to lay the first wholly privately owned sub-marine cable between Ireland and the UK. This will have a 48 fibre 2.5 gbt capacity and will further interconnect with the new US to UK cable that is under construction.

Other service providers such as BT, TCL Telecom and Stentor are also making progress in providing broadband to the Irish enterprise sector.

A reallocation of 10M ECU from savings within the telecommunications measure of the Economic Infrastructure Operational Programme (EIOP) to fund a new measure for broadband telecommunications to assist the development of the Information Society in Ireland has been approved. A number of possible expenditure proposals for this funding have been identified by the Department of Public Enterprise.

Cable-Networks

In the Irish market Cablelink is testing cable modems, comparing potential suppliers, and evaluating network considerations. Cablelink is planning to offer commercial cable Internet access services in 1998. Irish Multi-Channel is preparing for tests of cable modems on MMDS, and also plans to launch a service in 1998. Cable Management Ireland is currently conducting tests on two-way cable modems in the Swords cable network. 1,000 homes have been upgraded for two-way operation in a trial run of Internet-access services using two-way cable modems. Cable Management Ireland Ltd. plans to charge approximately stlg25 per month for the two way service (not including installation).

Learning

D/Education Policy on Computers in Schools

The Department of Education have launched/are about to launch?? their Schools IT2000 Report....

Information Age Schools

In the context of the Schools IT2000 project, Telecom Eireann have provided stlg10m towards the objective of equipping all primary and secondary schools in Ireland with advanced Information and Communications Technologies by the year 2000. The Information Society Commission welcomes such a partnership approach to the development of projects which further the aims of promoting an Information Society in Ireland. The Commission will encourage and facilitate the development of such partnership arrangements in the future.

RTC Initiative (further details needed)

A joint initiative co-funded with industry and the RTC's has been launched. This is an 18 month course which includes work experience and job placement subsequently and targets the long term unemployed and aims to upskill existing employees. 300 people will be on the first module.

Enterprise

Digital Park

Following the Report of the Information Society Steering Committee the Taoiseach asked Forfas to explore the potential for a 'Digital Park' in Ireland. Forfas subsequently established a Steering Group to formulate the Terms of Reference for a feasibility study on the project.

Consultants have been engaged by Forfas to conduct this feasibility study and a recommendation concerning the Digital Park will be put before the Forfas board at its meeting on 19 November.

Skills Shortages

Some important actions have been taken in 1997 to address the issues of skills shortages in the technology area.

At the beginning of the summer, Forfas launched a major new three-year campaign aimed at encouraging more young people to take up jobs in the Tele-Services, Electronics and Software industries.

The first phase of this campaign involved the distribution of a brochure to 55,000 school leavers, teachers and career guidance counsellors countrywide highlighting the job opportunities that now exist in the above sectors.

3,000 new places have also come on stream in 1997 in University, RTC/Institute of Technology and Post-Leaving Cert (PLC) courses in the VEC sector designed to meet these high-tech requirements.

Also, an amendment to the Finance Bill earlier in the year has made provision for individuals to avail of tax relief at the standard rate on fees of up to stlg1,000 per year

paid towards the cost of approved training and development courses in the I.T. and language areas.

Competitiveness

The National Competitiveness Council was established following international competitiveness reports which had placed Ireland in a relatively poor position. Its terms of reference are to:

- Prepare and submit to the Taoiseach, a report on the main challenges facing the enterprise sector over the medium term and the policy responses required to meet them; and
- Examine and monitor policies and actions that impact on the competitiveness of the enterprise sector and prepare reports on priority competitiveness issues, as appropriate, with recommendations required to improve competitiveness.

Government

Legal Issues

Since the Report of the Steering Committee the Department of Justice have established a Working Group on the Illegal and Harmful Use of the Internet. Also, the Fraud Bill [status to be checked] contains provisions which cover the dishonest use of a computer. The Child Pornography Bill which is currently being drafted will also address the issues of the new media that are available as a result of developments in ICT's.

Government Services and Social Inclusion

There are many initiatives underway within several Government Departments which deal with increasing the levels of Government Business conducted with the public which can be conducted electronically. The majority of Government Departments now have web-sites.

Examples of new ways of providing government services particularly worth noting are:

Customs and Excise Tariffs were made available by the Revenue Commissioners on Compact Disc from 30 June.

The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs are working as part of a consortium on an EU funded project to develop stand alone multi-media kiosks which could be deployed in public areas to provide services in an interactive way.

Work Programme of the Information Society Commission

Advisory Groups

In order to progress the programme of work set out by the Steering Committee the Commission is working to the five pillar areas identified in the Report. To address and pursue the issues in these different areas, six advisory groups have been appointed (two in the Government area) to work with them in moving the strategy forward.

These Groups commenced meeting in August and have been meeting regularly over the course of the last few months. The main body of this Report details the work of the Groups so far, comments on progress since the publication of the Steering Committee Report, identifies priority areas and makes recommendations for actions that need to be taken as a matter of urgency.

Each of the Advisory Groups is chaired by a different Commission member who reports on progress at the monthly meetings of the Commission.

PILLAR V

Government Services and Social Inclusion

The Steering Committee Report identified that:

"The challenge for government is to deliver more with less as people increasingly demand better services but, as taxpayers, are unwilling to pay more [and] .. Providing access to the technologies and information networks to those groups currently disadvantaged.. will be central to the creation of a more inclusive society."

Undoubtedly, the development of the Information Society in Ireland presents Government with many challenges and opportunities. Specifically, Government can take a lead role in the development of information and communication technologies in the delivery of its services and it can act to provide access to the Information Society to society giving special consideration to those on the periphery. The development of citizen-centred services and policies that support the transition to the Information Society must be key goals for Government.

Activity to Date

The Government Services and Social Inclusion Group have focussed on the need to integrate the provision of Government services and to assess the impact that policy decisions will have on this.

The Group has worked to gather information on the current practices of Government Departments and Agencies for the delivery of public services using ICT's and the future plans in this area. Demonstrations have been provided of particular models that are currently in operation such as the [kiosk]developed by the National Social Services Board for the provision of social services. This technology is available at all 50 Citizens Advice Bureaux around the country.

Consideration has also been given to the area of overlap between the terms of reference of this group and work on the development of Government Services that is ongoing under the Strategic Management Initiative [further piece to be inserted here on SMI].

Priority Areas to be Addressed in the Short-term

Examples of best international practice for the delivery of Government Services electronically will be collected and disseminated by this Group.

The progress of Government Departments and Agencies in employing ICT's to improve service delivery will be monitored and the group will continue to liaise with the SMI sub-group on Information Technology in the Civil and Public Service [check name of group] in this regard.

This Group will work to identify, as a matter of priority, areas of government business that are particularly suited to being transacted electronically. An example of this would be to allow for the purchase of particular licences over the Internet with a credit card. Urgent attention will also be given to the issue of universal design and how best to ensure that the needs of marginalised groups are incorporated at design stage where new technologies are being employed for the delivery of government services.

Recommendations for Specific Action

Government should take a decision to make all published information available electronically and on paper at the same time [specify timescale?].

Better low-cost telephony access, voice response systems and self-service over the Internet must be examined by all Government Departments and Offices immediately.

Government web-sites should be developed with a view to increasing interactivity and potential for service-delivery.

Codes of practice should be developed to ensure that all Government web-pages are designed to be accessible to people with disabilities.