IMPLEMENTING
THE INFORMATION SOCIETY
IN IRELAND:

AN ACTION PLAN

**Information
Society
Ireland**

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.

1.   The Information Society represents a phenomenal challenge and opportunity for Ireland. We are at the early stages of a new industrial revolution - one which will have more dramatic implications than any other single industrial development in the history of the State. New structures and business models are evolving but, unlike in previous times, these developments are taking place at breakneck speed.

2.   Rapid response is needed to ensure that the benefits of the Information Society can be availed of by Irish citizens and Irish businesses, thus contributing to the ongoing improvement of Ireland's society and economy. If we are to maintain and build on our economic success of recent years, and ensure that all of society can participate in the Information Society, it is vital that Ireland becomes both an early mover and a global player in the Information Society.

3.   Failure to take action could mean that much of the strong economic performance of recent years could be lost, particularly as international companies who have chosen to locate activities in Ireland would be likely to move to other, more advanced, countries. Failure to act would also mean missing out on the opportunities to improve the social inclusion process through the use of information and communication technologies.

4.   The Government has concluded that, in order to prepare Ireland for the Information Society and to take full advantage of the opportunities available to Ireland, a comprehensive action framework is required. In coming to its conclusions, the Government has taken into account the views and recommendations of the Information Society Commission. The need for a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach is also confirmed by a number of recent reports, including the Report of the Advisory Committee on Telecommunications. the National Competitiveness Council's Statement on Telecommunications: a Key Factor in Electronic Commerce and Competitiveness, and IBEC's report on Telecommunications after Liberalisation - Policies for Ireland.

5.   In order to provide such a framework, the Government has adopted an Action Plan which sets out a range of measures appropriate to development of a true Information Society in Ireland. The Action Plan, which is set out in the following sections, covers a number of broad areas: telecommunications infrastructure, development of electronic commerce and business opportunities, enabling measures, legislative measures, ICTs and delivery of public services, support areas where action is needed, and taking the work forward.

6.   The objective of the Action Plan is to present a comprehensive strategic plan embracing all tasks which need to be addressed. Consequently, it includes a combination of completely new tasks and tasks which have already been identified as necessary and where, in some instances, action has already commenced. It also indicates the Departments or bodies with responsibility for each action point. Finally, where relevant, it provides a target date for completion of the action points.

7.   The Action Plan seeks to balance the need to make rapid progress with allowing sufficient time for specific tasks to be completed in a manner which fits neatly with other elements of the plan. In addition, in the context of use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the public service, it recognises that a number of different levels of work can be advanced in parallel, even though they will not necessarily come to completion at the same time.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE.

International connectivity.

8.   A task force reporting to the Minister for Public Enterprise has been established to negotiate a memorandum of understanding with a global connectivity provider regarding provision of large scale international connectivity. Agreement on provision of this connectivity should be reached in the first half of 1999. In parallel, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, in conjunction with other relevant Departments and agencies, will

proceed with negotiations on the formation of a consortium to run the relevant infrastructure. The Department of Public Enterprise will also give consideration to what other measures, if any, are needed in this area.

Submarine cable licencing.

9. Clear procedures regarding the granting of submarine cable licences will be drawn up by the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources, in consultation with the Department of Public Enterprise, by end February 1999.

Regulatory issues.

10. Consideration will be given by the relevant Departments to how the actions of the Office of the Director of Telecommunications Regulation (ODTR), the Competition Authority, the Independent Radio and Television Commission (IRTC) and the new entity with responsibility for digital television transmission should be co-ordinated with regard to regulating the new, converged environment. This review will also consider what legislative provisions, if any, are required to strengthen the promotion of competition in this sector and will involve consultation with the agencies concerned. The review will be completed by end March 1999.

Nation-wide broadband network.

11. £18 million (c. 23 million euros) of EU Structural Funds has been allocated to assist in providing nation-wide broadband connectivity. The Department of Public Enterprise, together with Forfás, will prepare estimates of further funding requirements by end March 1999. In addition, they will finalise a comprehensive position regarding possible negotiation of future EU funding under the next Community Support Framework for Ireland.

North-South Digital Corridor.

12. Discussions between officials from both sides regarding the possibility of developing a North-South Digital Corridor will be progressed as quickly as possible.

Local Access.

13.   The Department of Public Enterprise will monitor progress in this area with the Office of the Director of Telecommunications Regulation, with a view to introducing measures to unbundle the local loop and provide wireless local loop access as quickly as possible, as recommended by the Advisory Committee on Telecommunications.

Telecom Eireann IPO and divestiture of Cablelink.

14.   The Department of Public Enterprise will continue with its preparations in these areas, with a view to divestiture of Cablelink being completed by April 1999 and the Telecom Eireann IPO taking place by July 1999.

Communications Infrastructure Group.

15.   The Department of Public Enterprise will establish an industry infrastructure group by end February 1999.

DEVELOPMENT OF ELECTRONIC COMMERCE AND BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

Digital Park.

16.   Work to bring the west Dublin Digital Park site into operation is now well under way by IDA Ireland, in conjunction with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Public Enterprise, as appropriate. Work on identification of a satisfactory second site, in the Dublin Docklands area, will be completed as quickly as possible by IDA Ireland.

Business Development Action Programme.

17.   The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the industrial development agencies will finalise an action programme for the development of electronic commerce and associated business and employment opportunities, both in the area of foreign direct investment and indigenous company development, by end March 1999.

Entrepreneurship.

18.   The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment will consider measures to develop the entrepreneurship culture in the context of the work of the development agencies and preparation of the action programme referred to above.

ENABLING MEASURES.

Access.

19.   The Department of the Environment and Local Government will ensure that PCs, ISDN connections and internet access are installed in every public library. This work will be implemented on a phased basis, commencing immediately.

20.   The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs will expand its programme of providing computer facilities and training to the community and voluntary organisations during 1999.

21.   Further consideration will be given to means of extending access to those who do not have PC/internet access at present, including examining the scope for use of dedicated kiosks and other nation-wide networks such as schools, post offices etc. A report on this issue, including the potential offered in this context by the development of Digital TV services, will be prepared by end June 1999. The report will also explore the scope for reducing computer acquisition costs.

Internet access costs.

22.   The Department of Public Enterprise will continue to encourage lower internet access and usage costs from ISPs and telecommunications operators.

"E-mail for all".

23.   The Information Society Commission is being invited to conclude its assessment of the possibility and merit of providing an e-mail address and internet access for every citizen by end March 1999.

Certification authorities and digital certificates.

24.   The Department of Public Enterprise, in conjunction with other Departments developing flagship projects aimed at electronic delivery of public services, will identify potentially suitable certification authorities, with a view to at least one such entity being established by June 1999. In parallel, consideration will be given to what, if any, State body should be responsible for the accreditation of certification authorities. The Department of Public Enterprise will finalise legislative proposals concerning a system for recognition of certificates issued by foreign certification authorities by June 1999.

Protection of rights and data.

25.   The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment will monitor international developments in this area, and will consider mechanisms to ensure that international legal obligations are met while accommodating self-regulatory approaches to implementation.

Public service access interfaces.

26.   The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, in conjunction with other concerned Departments and agencies, will develop an Integrated Social Services Strategy as a citizen-centred initiative to facilitate integrated access to public services, building on the legislative framework introduced in 1998 for the Personal Public Services Number and the Public Services Card. The objective is a common access interface for use by citizens in availing of public services and accessing information. The strategy will incorporate satisfactory certification and encryption techniques to permit secure electronic transactions between the citizen and the public service.   A progress report will be prepared by June 1999.

27. The Departments of Health and Children and Social, Community and Family Affairs will ensure that these concepts are fully incorporated into plans for development of the General Register Office.

28.   The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment will ensure that similar arrangements are put in place for businesses, in the context of development of the Companies Registration Office.

29.   Initiatives in this area will be co-ordinated with a view to ensuring the maximum possible common interface, and full compatibility with any digital certification requirements needed for secure electronic communication.

Electronic payment mechanisms.

30.   The financial institutions will be requested to prepare proposals for appropriate systems to facilitate further deployment of electronic payments in the economy. Consultations will be held with the various interest groups with a view to agreeing mechanisms to take work forward rapidly in this area. Mechanisms to progress this area of work, involving representatives of the various interest groups, will be in place by end March 1999.

LEGISLATIVE AND REGULATORY MEASURES.

Digital signatures and encryption.

31.   Legislation to facilitate electronic transactions, covering the establishment of certification authorities and giving legal recognition to electronic signatures, is being drafted by the Department of Public Enterprise. Draft Heads of Bill will be prepared before end April 1999.

Electronic evidence in Courts.

32.   The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the Department of Public Enterprise, will investigate the scope for early enactment of legislation on this topic, pending its inclusion in more general provisions on the treatment of hearsay.

Data protection.

33.   The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment will seek to provide for appropriate self-regulation measures within the relevant legislation.

Copyright.

34.   Draft legislation has been prepared by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. This legislation will be enacted at the earliest possible opportunity.

Telecom Eireann IPO.

35.   The Department of Public Enterprise will prepare legislation with a view to enactment by March 1999.

Telecommunications infrastructure installation/access.

36.   Proposals for legislation concerning the installation of telecommunications infrastructure, governing issues such as rights of way for telecommunications operators to install access, sharing of infrastructure between operators, etc. in this regard have been prepared by the Department of Public Enterprise and were presented to Government in July 1998. Draft legislation will be published shortly.

Telecommunications regulation.

37.   Following the review referred to above (paragraph 10), the Department of Public Enterprise will prepare a paper on Telecommunications Regulatory Policy as a prelude to preparation of legislation to address the powers of the ODTR and that Office's role in relation to competition, if appropriate. This paper will be prepared by end May 1999.

Digital TV.

38.   The Department of the Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands will finalise its work on the drafting of legislation to give effect to the Government decisions in the area of digital terrestrial television, including the expanded role envisaged for the IRTC, with a view to enactment by mid 1999. The process of identifying an equity partner for RTE to create an entity to operate the transmission infrastructure should also be completed by then.

International developments.

39.   The relevant Government Departments and agencies, including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment,

the Department of Finance and the Office of the Revenue Commissioners will promote the Irish Government's position in any international developments regarding electronic commerce, including the view that specific new taxes are not required, and ensure that any agreements made at EU, OECD, etc. are transposed into national law as quickly as possible.

ICTS AND DELIVERY OF PUBLIC SERVICES.

Strand one - information services.

40. All Departments and agencies will ensure that they operate websites which provide up to date information, forms, leaflets, etc., together with useful links to other sites. New material will be made available electronically via websites at the same time as it is provided by more traditional means. Those that do not already provide such services will do so immediately.

41. E-mail will be incorporated into the normal range of contact methods and Departments and agencies will implement arrangements for rapid response to e-mail queries. "Push" technologies will be used as much as possible to disseminate information.

42. Service-wide guidelines and practices will be adopted regarding content format and presentation etc. for websites, and an Inter-Departmental group will be established to deal with these issues. Government policy in relation to provision of services in the Irish language will be reflected in this context.

43. Quality standards for public service websites, including provision for the needs of people with a disability, will be incorporated into the Quality Customer Service component of the Strategic Management Initiative. Each Department will carry out an audit regarding the requirements of this action point by March 1999, and the results of this audit will be included in each Department's annual report.

44. Databases which present public service information electronically in a client-centred manner - one dealing with citizens,

one for business needs - will be commissioned.   The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs will lead through the National Social Services Board on the citizen database, with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment leading on the business database. Both databases should be operational by the end of 1999. The Departments concerned will also prepare plans for the ongoing maintenance of the data in these projects.

45.   Public servants will be encouraged to apply the benefits of ICTs and to keep themselves abreast of developments in this area and how they can be integrated into their business plans. The Department of Finance (CMOD) will prepare proposals for educational and development initiatives in this regard by end March 1999, with a view to implementation during 1999.

Strand two - interactive services.

46.   All new ICT-based service delivery projects will be obliged to comply with the principles to be developed under this Action Plan concerning electronic delivery, electronic payments, electronic exchange methods where data is communicated between Departments, and the use of digital certificate concepts. Compliance with these principles will be taken into account in the context of resource allocation.

47.   Flagship pilot projects aimed at establishing reliable electronic access interfaces will be developed during 1999 by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (in the context of the Personal Public Service Number/Public Service Card initiative), the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (for the Company Registration Office) and the Land Registry (for an electronic service for folio access).   Progress reports will be made quarterly, starting in March 1999.

48.   The following pilot projects common across Departments will be developed: a secure intranet to facilitate safe electronic communication between Departments; provision of public procurement information electronically and further development of a virtual private telephone network (possibly in conjunction with the intranet mentioned above).   The Department of Finance (CMOD) will lead on these projects, and progress reports will be made quarterly, starting in March 1999.

49.   Electronic payment systems will be developed further within the public service, and clients will be encouraged to take up electronic payment options. This will reflect initiatives to promote electronic payment systems in general.

50.   A number of individual Departments will introduce flagship pilot projects. These projects, which are indicated in the following paragraphs, will be developed rapidly. Where they do not already exist, development plans will be prepared with a view to the pilot projects being launched during 1999. Quarterly progress reports will be made, beginning in March 1999. The projects will be compatible with the client interface and digital certificate developments described above (paragraph 26).

51.   The Office of the Revenue Commissioners will select at least one of their large volume returns (e.g. the periodic VAT return or the Self Assessment returns for companies and for sole traders) as a pilot project for electronic filing.   They will also investigate the scope for introducing new electronic payment options, and will bring forward at least one pilot project in this area.

52.   The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (CRO) will continue to develop a pilot project for electronic delivery of annual company returns. That Department will also proceed with its plans to introduce electronic filing of annual returns by insurance companies and a facility to calculate and submit claims for Redundancy and Insolvency payments.

53.   The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs will identify and develop candidate services for full electronic delivery using the Public Services Card/Integrated Citizen's Access concepts referred to above (paragraphs 26 and 47). This Department will also continue with its pilot project concerning delivery of benefit payments using Laser cards, in the context of the Ennis Information Age Town project.

54.   The Department of Health and Children will develop pilot electronic services for patient identification, tracking of healthcare records, etc., also using the Public Services Card/Integrated Social Services System concepts referred to above.

55.   The Department of Agriculture and Food will proceed with a pilot project to allow farmers to submit application forms for headage and premium schemes electronically.

56.   The Department of Environment and Local Government will develop a pilot project to allow electronic processing of driving test applications, including electronic payment of the test fee.

57.   The Central Statistics Office will develop its dissemination services to enable users to have greater access to its statistics and databases via the internet. It will also establish a pilot project for the submission by companies of appropriate statistical returns in electronic form.

58.   The Department of Environment and Local Government (local authorities), the Department of Health and Children (health boards) and the Department of Education and Science (schools) will each develop secure sectoral intranets, over which they can conduct business with their respective bodies.

59.   The scope for developing a public service delivery channel in the context of development of Digital TV services and as a means of providing electronic access to public services will be considered. This concept will be covered in a report by end June 1999.

60.   Each Department and agency will include in its annual report a section on progress being made regarding use of ICTs and delivery of services electronically, including the results of an internal audit in this area.

Strand three - fully integrated services.

61.   A detailed examination of the issues appropriate to the development of fully integrated public services (strand three) will commence, with a view to identifying how far this strand can be developed, preparing proposals for suitable initiatives and indicating how they should be taken forward. A report on this issue will be completed in 1999.

SUPPORT AREAS WHERE ACTION IS NEEDED

Awareness.

62.   The Information Society Commission and IBEC will continue with implementation of their joint awareness campaign for small and medium enterprises during 1999.

63. The Information Society Commission will be invited to prepare proposals for further, complementary awareness initiatives for the general public and for the voluntary organisation/NGO sector, with a view to implementation during the remainder of 1999.

Education.

64. Rapid application of the Education Technology Investment Fund and implementation of the Schools IT 2000 Initiative will be pursued by the Department of Education and Science.

65. The Information Society Commission will be invited to examine further means of developing the concept of lifelong learning, of extending access to the formal educational infrastructure to those outside the formal education process and of identifying further options to introduce new learning possibilities for the population in general.

Future skills needs.

66. The recommendations of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs will be considered and appropriate measures adopted as quickly as possible.

Application of ICTs to the elderly/people with disabilities.

67. As part of the strategy to address social exclusion, the special needs of the elderly and people with disabilities will be addressed. Good practice using established design standards will be incorporated into the development of ICT applications by Government Departments and agencies, and the National Disability Authority will be invited to monitor standards in this area.

Market information and benchmarking progress.

68. Proposals for the establishment of a Market Observatory will be finalised by the Departments of Public Enterprise and Enterprise, Trade and Employment and its agencies, and the Information Society Commission by end February 1999, with a view to this facility being established by mid 1999. The same bodies will also prepare proposals by end February 1999 on the development of mechanisms to benchmark Ireland's progress and state of readiness compared with international standards.

Research and development.

69. The Departments of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and Education and Science, in conjunction with other relevant Departments and agencies, will prepare proposals for improvements in the area of research and development, also taking into account the recommendations in this area of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs.

TAKING THE WORK FORWARD.

International debate.

70. Government Departments dealing with policy aspects of the Information Society will ensure that Ireland is represented at all relevant discussions at international level, that Ireland's views are incorporated into any proposals or decisions to the greatest possible extent and that adequate arrangements are in place for the rapid dissemination of information from these discussions. This will be done on an ongoing basis.

Implementation Group.

71. An Inter-Departmental Group is being established to ensure that the Action Plan is implemented by the appropriate Departments and agencies, and to prepare further proposals for the development of the Information Society as necessary. Membership of the Group will be at Assistant Secretary General level.

Information Society Policy Development Team.

72. An Information Society Policy Development Team is being established to assist the Implementation Group in its work, to co-ordinate activities relating to implementing the Information Society and to contribute to policy development in this area.

Resources.

73. The resources needed to ensure successful implementation of this plan will be assessed by Departments and agencies, in consultation with the Departments of the Taoiseach and Finance, and the Implementation Group, and in accordance with normal financial planning.

74. Departments and agencies will ensure that their internal resource allocation strategies reflect the high priority accorded by Government to implementation of this plan.