



# POLICY SUBMISSION

**Submission on Information Society  
Commission discussion document  
on IT access for all**

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## 1. **Introduction**

The Agency has a statutory responsibility to advise government - and by extension government-related agencies - on all aspects of social and economic planning in relation to poverty. This remit includes emerging issues such as the 'information society'<sup>1</sup>. In this context, the Agency welcomes the Information Society Commission concern with IT access for all and appreciates the opportunity to comment on its discussion document on this topic.

The Agency submission has two elements. The first part elaborates the broader poverty context and policy framework in which the information society operates and identifies some policy and strategic issues influencing IT access for all. The second part considers the practical issues relating to physical access points and e-mail provision, which are raised in the discussion document.

We note that the Commission has established a committee to consider the issue of IT access for all. The Agency would like to raise its concern at the gender imbalance of the committee and the absence of an anti-poverty representative from the community and voluntary sector. The contribution of the sector is now widely recognised in official policy-making. The committee would especially benefit from voluntary representation in terms of the sector's understanding of and expertise on IT access.

## 2. **Poverty, the information society and public policy**

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy defines poverty as follows:

*People are living in poverty, if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.<sup>2</sup>*

Income poverty - defined as less than half of average income - affects 22% of the population, with 10% experiencing a combination of income poverty and resource deprivation. The likelihood of poverty is high for unemployed households and those headed by someone working in the home. In general, households with children are more likely to be in poverty, with children being at greater risk than adults.<sup>3</sup>

Poverty is not just a material state; it also results in exclusion from everyday activities, such as education, communications, decision-making, etc. Clearly, limited access to information and communications technologies can form part of this wider pattern of social exclusion. The discussion document rightly notes that

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<sup>1</sup> The information society can be defined as a 'society characterised by a high level of information intensity in the everyday life of most citizens, in most organisations and workplaces; by the use of common or compatible technology for a wide range of personal, social, educational and business activities; and by the ability to transmit, receive and exchange digital data rapidly between places irrespective of distance'. *The net result. Social inclusion in the information society*. Report of the National Working Group on Social Inclusion (no date), IBM and the Community Development Foundation

<sup>2</sup> Government of Ireland (1997), *Sharing in progress. National Anti-Poverty Strategy*, Dublin: Stationery Office, p3

<sup>3</sup> Callan, T et al (1999), *Monitoring poverty trends*. Dublin: Stationery Office and Combat Poverty Agency

*Certain sectors of society are particularly at risk of being left behind and it is essential that we avoid compounding problems of social deprivation by creating a new under-skilled, under-class. (p4)*

The information society is thus both a danger and an opportunity. A danger in that because of pre-existing poverty and inequality in society it merely constitutes another layer of social exclusion and second-class citizenship. An opportunity because new technology has most to offer to those experiencing social exclusion, in terms of new skills, better access to information, community empowerment, etc. However, these opportunities will only be realised if the policy context for the development of IT actively discriminates in favour of the needs of those who are poor. IT, just as education or any other service, cannot be oblivious to its social milieu.

Indeed, the very notion of an information society is problematic, as it suggests an elite membership-based grouping, to which all citizens do not have access.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the discussion document's view that an information society, by definition, 'must be an inclusive one', is not necessarily the case. This is reflected in that fact that public policy discussion about IT has given very limited emphasis on citizenship and social rights, as distinct from the economic benefits and technological advancements it offers.

It is important, therefore, that the development of the information society should be situated in an explicit anti-poverty policy framework. The key policy statement here is the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.<sup>5</sup> The strategy is a major government-led cross-departmental policy initiative designed to place the needs of the poor and the socially excluded among the issues at the top of the Government's policy agenda. Key principles of the strategy which are especially relevant to the development of IT are:

- ensuring equal access and participation for all;
- guaranteeing the rights of minorities;
- actively involving the community and voluntary sector.

It is disappointing that the discussion document makes no reference to this policy statement. Nor does it refer to the on-going work of the various institutional bodies that support this strategy such as the Inter-Departmental Policy Committee, the government guidelines for poverty-proofing policy, the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion, the National Anti-Poverty Strategy Unit in the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs or the Agency.<sup>6</sup> These omissions are probably related to the narrow brief of the discussion document and the imbalanced membership of its drafting committee.

The Agency sees the information society as of importance for the following reasons in tackling poverty and social exclusion:

- in the first instance, as a tool of citizenship and social rights;
- second, as a means of enhancing employment and learning prospects;
- and third, as a way of promoting community and voluntary activity.

These reasons should be reflected in the thinking underlying IT access for all. The Agency welcomes the discussion document's assertion of the importance of

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<sup>4</sup> Report of the National Working Group on Social Inclusion, op cit.

<sup>5</sup> Government of Ireland, op cit.

<sup>6</sup> Further information on any of the above can be got from the Agency of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy Unit in the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs.

information technology being accessible to everyone in order to avoid the creation of a new under-skilled, under-class and that existing such groups have potentially the most to gain from new technology. However, there is a need to elaborate a stronger conceptual basis for this viewpoint that can command public support and policy commitment. The Commission should make an explicit argument about how 'providing access to the technologies and information networks to those groups currently disadvantaged.....will be central to the creation of a more inclusive society'.<sup>7</sup> This should be the first step in developing a programme of IT access for all. The Agency recommends the report of the UK national working party on social inclusion, convened by IBM and the Community Development Foundation, as a model for this.<sup>8</sup>

### **3. Access to information technology - an anti-poverty perspective**

The report of the national working party on social inclusion identifies six key aspects of access to IT from an anti-poverty perspective:

- universal access and universal service;
- levels of private computer ownership;
- principle of public access;
- costs of getting connected;
- technology for access
- expert help.<sup>9</sup>

IT access for all is far more than just a question of physical access, as is suggested in the discussion document. The discussion document states that a Commission survey showed that 'where access to information and communication technology is provided, usage inevitably followed' (p10). However, at this stage, it is crucial to recognise that, according to research and experience of IT in the community and voluntary sector<sup>10</sup>, the simple provision of the technology will not ensure its use. To ensure that the technology is taken up, accessible technical support and resources are needed both by individuals and by community organisations. Training and technical back-up is essential, as is a reason for or benefit from use of the technology. Experience in the community sector shows that usage only follows if there is training and 'trouble-shooters', and where the technology is absorbed into work, leisure or other activities. If these do not occur, computers, scanners, Internet software and modems will be ignored.<sup>11</sup>

According to the discussion document, '(t)hose most at risk of being left behind are those who do not have the means to acquire the equipment necessary to access services such as the Internet and email and do not know how to use a PC' (p27). However, ensuring that excluded groups get access to IT will require more than physical access points in libraries and government departments. Training centres or resourced and staffed electronic halls in community centres will be necessary.

An IT access for all programme must include a well managed, integrated strategic programme of training in IT which reflects the different interests and needs of people living in poverty or disadvantaged areas. Training and equal access are pivotal to ensuring IT access for all. It is essential that any document or programme from the Commission outlines clearly the objectives, the targets and methods to ensure that

<sup>7</sup> *Information Society Ireland. Strategy for action.* Report of Ireland's Information Society Steering Committee, 1996, Dublin: Forfas, p44

<sup>8</sup> Report of the National Working Group on Social Inclusion, op cit.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p33. Relevant extracts from the report are included as an annex to this submission.

<sup>10</sup> O'Donnell, Trench, Ennals *Weak Connections - The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age*

<sup>11</sup> Ennals, K (1997) *Social Policy Review*

people are able to take part in training and to access the opportunities provided by IT. Further consideration or implementation of an IT access programme should involve representatives from the community/voluntary sector and have a gender balance.

#### **4. Access points to information technology**

The discussion document considers a number of locations for the development of IT access centres, the most important of which are discussed below. There is also consideration of the provision of training and resources to support such centres.

##### ***Libraries***

The discussion document highlights libraries as an 'ideal network for the provision of access to IT and to the Internet' (p13). However, the document goes on to indicate that less than one third of libraries had Internet and email access. Clearly, this low level of provision needs to be dealt with. Another concern is the low rate of library membership and the low numbers availing of library services (22% in 1994<sup>12</sup>).

The discussion document recommends that libraries should provide the key focus for State investment in an IT access for all programme and that access points in libraries should be increased. The Agency would concur but also ask that libraries are resourced in terms of both funding and staffing so that the service provided is accessible and inclusive. There is a need for libraries to be more user friendly and to be more open to different communities. Resources to support a library-based IT service are also required.

The Agency would suggest that, if the library service is to be enhanced and operate as the key focal point for the IT access for all, that resources are targeted at disadvantaged areas. For libraries to target socially excluded people living in disadvantaged areas, there needs to be consideration of the following issues:

- income restrictions (eg library fees, getting to libraries, larger family visits);
- physical access (eg disability and child friendly);
- social/cultural accessibility (eg is the place intimidating, can staff respond to people with learning difficulties, language differences?).

Becoming effective local access points will require considerable resources for equipment and training for both library staff and members of the public.

##### ***Schools***

The Agency agrees with the proposal to encourage schools to act as central facilitators of community access to information and communications technology. With resources and inter-agency co-operation, schools could encourage and support both pupils and parents. This could involve parents of children living in disadvantaged areas coming into the school and being given training in IT. There is a number of local case studies which show the advantage of co-operation and parental involvement in schools.<sup>13</sup> Using schools as a key community access point would have enormous benefit. However, a variety of support resources would be needed, including support and training for teachers and extended school opening hours. A partnership-based integrated response is recommended.

<sup>12</sup> Healy, Y, 'There's more to libraries than lending books', *The Irish Times E&L Supplement*, Feb 3<sup>rd</sup> 1998, pp2-3

<sup>13</sup> Rourke, S (1999) *A learning experience, Case studies on local integrated strategies to tackle educational disadvantage*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency

**Community and voluntary sector**

The involvement of the community and voluntary sector in IT provision is crucial. The potential offered by the vast network of community and voluntary organisations active throughout the country is not sufficiently acknowledged in the discussion document. This sector offers a huge opportunity to promote IT access if adequately resourced and supported. The Agency believes that, given the resources, the community and voluntary sector could play a key role in ensuring access for the target audiences identified in the discussion document and, indeed, has already made in-roads in this regard.

There are many community and voluntary organisations working with unemployed people, people living in disadvantaged areas, lone parents, Travellers and other excluded groups. Many of these groups are leading the way in providing IT access to participants on temporary employment schemes, volunteers, management committees, employees and clients. However, despite having the technology as a result of EU or other funding, many struggle without the technical support or the strategic management which would enable them to put the technology to positive and effective use.<sup>14</sup> Many grapple with commercial outlets that do not understand the specific needs of the sector or the problems encountered by the community. Money is often wasted in technical support or troubleshooting costs which are unnecessary.<sup>15</sup>

The technology capability in community organisations is often unused. Administrative and communication practices are hard to change and the technological expertise is not available. Available research has already documented clearly these kind of problems. This research needs to be examined by the Commission and its implications understood in implementing a strategy for access to all. It is disappointing that none of the research or these experiences were referred to and used to develop solutions.

If the community sector is resourced and has access to appropriate technical support, then the possibilities of extending IT access would be considerable for their disparate client groupings. This could take the form of electronic village halls (centres which provide equipment for the use of the community), including staff providing technical advice and support. This could be placed in existing community facilities or be linked to schools. There are many opportunities within a vibrant community and voluntary sector which the Commission could examine and develop. Examples are the Community Exchange Network (a community mailing list), citizens information centres, community development projects, national anti-poverty networks and local development partnerships (eg Action South Kildare, which has developed the Kildare Community Network as an Internet site in conjunction with Kildare County Council).

**Commercial**

The recommendation of the discussion document to look at the commercial viability of An Post establishing internet access devices in appropriate branches as well as in other retail outlets is supported. However, the Agency would be concerned as to its likely success without a strategic approach and a programme which incorporated training in a managed programme. This again would require resources.

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<sup>14</sup> Inner City Computer Network (1997), *Action Research*, Dublin Inner City Partnership

<sup>15</sup> Dublin Inner City Information Society Initiative, *Proposal for Investment*. 1999

### ***Training and resources***

The issue of training and resources are clearly the most important issues when considering IT access for all – particularly when dealing with disadvantaged sections of the community. The Agency is very concerned that this section of the discussion document only warranted a short examination and did not look at how these issues could be addressed in other recommendations.

### **5. E-mail provision**

The discussion document views the provision of universal e-mail as a central driver of IT access for all, with four options identified.<sup>16</sup> The Agency believes that only option 4 - automatic assignment of email address via government-support ISP - would be effective. Even then, it would require dedicated training and support to enable people – whether communities or individuals – to maximise usage of and benefit from IT. This is an expensive option, particularly if support is provided on a household basis. However, if the government targets disadvantaged areas and provides the necessary support through schools, libraries and community groups, it would be more cost effective and more likely to succeed in its goal of IT access for all.

### **6. Conclusion**

The Agency welcomes the Commission's discussion document on IT access for all and notes its emphasis on ensuring an inclusive information society. It is disappointed, however, by the failure to place its consideration of these issues in a broader policy context, as set out in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. A vision as to how IT access can complement this strategy is an essential first step. The UK report of the national working group on social inclusion is a model in this regard.

It is hoped that the outcome of the document will be more than just increased physical access to IT and the selection of one of the presented options on e-mail provision. Training and resources are crucial and it is important to make use of the opportunities within the community and voluntary sector to facilitate access for people who otherwise may not encounter IT. Libraries and schools offer a potential key resource, but these services need to be enhanced and targeted in order to maximise access, especially for people in remote areas, those without resources or with mobility difficulties. In addition, the services should be integrated with local anti-poverty initiatives.

People in poverty are excluded from a wide range of social, economic and cultural opportunities. As the document indicates, IT could exacerbate the gap between rich and poor or help to counter it. To-date, there has not been adequate consideration of

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<sup>16</sup> **Option 1:** Government actively promotes what is currently available in the market place in order to drive demand, without defining any standard for the e-mail provision

**Option 2:** Government invites ISPs to develop simple, easy to use web based e-mail services directed at late adopters and at those with accessibility issues. Such services must be easier to use than the current standard web-based mail services and would be actively promoted by Government at IT access sites around the country.

**Option 3:** Government develops a tender for an ISP to provide a dedicated web-based email service for all citizens which is easy to use and is designed to be highly accessible. Citizens elect whether or not to 'claim' their email address. Government effectively pays for the service to be provided.

**Option 4:** As above except that an email address is automatically assigned to every person on the electoral register.

this policy opportunity and the discussion document, while welcome, leaves some key issues unanswered in terms of the policy context for IT access for all. The recommendations and programme of action arising from the document should reflect all the issues involved and should develop an imaginative and radical plan to ensure IT access for all as part of a broader policy to tackle poverty and social exclusion.