

A Digital Inclusion Strategy

For

Northern Ireland



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1. Executive Summary

Access to and exploitation of modern technology – especially computing and Internet technology can enhance the quality of the life within today's society. Government fully recognises this and aims to facilitate a digitally inclusive society where all citizens, who so choose, are able to access low cost, convenient computing and Internet technology.

In order to pursue this important agenda, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, has set out a broad strategy which will run from May 2003 until December 2005.

Phase one of the strategy, from May 2003 until March 2004, will involve the collection and dissemination of information about digital inclusion initiatives currently underway in Northern Ireland and encouraging the public, private and community and voluntary sectors to work together to deliver the vision of a digitally inclusive society.

Phase two, from April 2004 to March 2005, will in addition, focus on identifying initiative or geographical gaps in access to computing and Internet technology. This phase of the strategy will also include research aimed at identifying obstacles to access and encouraging the development and uptake of access and training opportunities through project-based funding opportunities.

The third and final phase of this strategy will operate from April 2005 until 31 December 2005 and will focus primarily on reviewing the implementation of the strategy as well as continuing the activities outlined in phases one and two.

2. Introduction

This paper sets out the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's strategy for promoting digital inclusion in Northern Ireland.

The consultation paper 'Bridging The Digital Divide in Northern Ireland', published by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in August 2002, set out the scope of the problem. In summary, it showed that of those aged 16 and over in Northern Ireland, 53% stated that they do not have access to computing technology and / or the Internet.

The consultation paper also highlighted that specific groupings within society felt particularly disconnected from the 'information society'. This included 91% of those aged 65 and over, 70% of people with disabilities and 64% of those in the lower socio-economic groups.

Government, the wider public sector and the private sector increasingly conduct business through the Internet. Consumers of such services will therefore need appropriate opportunities and skills to access and utilise modern computing and Internet technology.

It is the implicit view of this strategy that all citizens, who so wish, should have access to modern technology and should be able to take advantage of opportunities offered by the Internet, email, word processing, database, spreadsheet and other related electronic tools.

This Digital Inclusion Strategy is based on 'research-action' principles. It takes the form of a 3-phase plan, with review points that will inform the strategy's future direction and emphasis.

This document should be read in tandem with the 'Bridging the Digital Divide' consultation paper (available online at <http://www.cituni.gov.uk/publications.htm>). The recommendations of that paper were welcomed by the consultees and form the basis of this strategy.

3. Overview

Research conducted in April 2002 by Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), on behalf of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, highlighted a number of obstacles which prevent citizens from making greater use of computing and Internet technologies including:

- Lack of interest;
- Lack of access to the technology; and
- Lack of relevant computing and Internet skills.

It is also clear that information on 'digital inclusion' initiatives and opportunities is not available in an easily accessible and understandable manner. This in turn has led to an under-estimation and lack of knowledge of the range and abundance of computing and Internet initiatives already in place.

An early action in implementing this Digital Inclusion Strategy therefore, will be to build and maintain an up-to-date knowledge base of relevant activities and initiatives. This will include schemes and programmes aimed at helping citizens access and make use of computing and Internet technologies. This knowledge base will then be used to make information on computing and Internet opportunities available to citizens, businesses and government.

This strategy acknowledges that the best way to ensure that all citizens enjoy the benefits of the 'Information Age' is through co-operation amongst all those interested in the topic. This will include, but will not be limited to, the 11 central government Departments, their Agencies and sponsored bodies, local government, the private sector and the community and voluntary sector.

4. The Vision for Digital Inclusion in Northern Ireland

Access to and exploitation of, modern technology, especially computing and Internet technology, is essential in today's society.

The digital inclusion vision for Northern Ireland is therefore:

“to ensure that every Northern Ireland citizen has the opportunity to maximise the use of computing and Internet technologies to enhance their quality of life”.

The ultimate aim being to create a digitally inclusive society where all citizens (irrespective of personal circumstances) will be able to access low cost, convenient computing and Internet technology.

It is the goal that by 31 December 2005:

- The percentage of NI citizens who will recognise and be prepared to take advantage of the access opportunities available, will be on a par with 'information elite' countries¹; and
- Difficulties experienced by certain groupings in society in accessing modern computing and Internet technology will have been overcome.

¹ These include the USA, The Netherlands, The Scandinavian countries and Australia. The best estimate for such a percentage by December 2005 is 70%

5. The Strategy – Phase One

It is essential that activities designed to bring about digital inclusion are based on sound research data and analysis.

The first year of this strategy, commencing May 2003, will focus on two main activities:

1. Collecting and disseminating information on those activities and initiatives which are already taking place throughout Northern Ireland; and
2. Encouraging public, private and community and voluntary sector organisations to work together to deliver the vision of digital inclusion.

To manage these activities, a new **Digital Inclusion Unit (DIU)** will be established within OFMDFM to oversee the implementation of this strategy. The Unit will have access to a broad range of skilled professionals encompassing areas such as marketing, communications and social, particularly digital, inclusion. In managing phase 1 of the strategy the Unit will:

- Commission from NISRA a second Omnibus Survey to track both the extent of the digital divide and the obstacles to greater use of computing and Internet technologies;
- Commission research to establish the full range across the public, private and community and voluntary sectors, of current and planned initiatives with a digital inclusion element;
- Interact with public, private and community and voluntary sectors to maximise input and contribution to relevant initiatives. This will be a major task for the DIU and will include encouraging businesses to give

support to individual providers of computing and Internet technologies and strategic support for the implementation of the recommendations inherent in this strategy;

- Make available, through phone, including text phone, and the Internet, an information database on all public facilities and initiatives in Northern Ireland relating to computing and Internet technology;
- Arrange for the branding of public access and training facilities to identify their quality and service to the community; and

- Commission public awareness campaigns, using a range of media, to ensure that citizens of Northern Ireland are aware of the



opportunities that computing and Internet technologies offer and of the local access opportunities that exist.

As a result of these activities, by March 2004 the public will have access to comprehensive data on relevant activities and initiatives throughout Northern Ireland. In addition, the processes required to build this knowledge base will be formalised to ensure that future initiatives and developments are co-ordinated, mutually beneficial and publicised.

It is acknowledged that citizens and businesses are best placed to give a lead in taking forward digital inclusion activities. Local community and voluntary groups know the needs of their members and their communities. To facilitate the sharing of knowledge and expertise the new DIU will establish a Digital Inclusion Working Group.

This Working Group will consist of representatives from the public, private and community and voluntary sectors and will be chaired at Ministerial level. Its remit will be to advise on digital inclusion activities and policies and to monitor progress towards the 70% target and the elimination of the access problems which some groups in society are currently facing.

6. The Strategy - Phase Two

The data collection exercise from Phase 1 will form the basis for activity in Phase 2 and will identify:

- Initiative gaps, whereby certain sectors of the population may be disadvantaged in having limited access to computing and Internet technology which could be resolved by targeted initiatives;
- Geographical gaps in access; and
- The scope, extent and pace of change of the digital divide in Northern Ireland.

Phase 2 of the strategy will continue the work started in year 1, (awareness, data collection and information provision), but will add three significant new elements:

1. Research into the specific obstacles to accessing computing and Internet technology which individual groups, for example, people with disabilities or those 65 years of age or over, within Northern Ireland may face;
2. Project based funding, if deemed appropriate by the digital inclusion working group, to encourage the development of access channels and training opportunities; and
3. Monitoring of access and training providers to ensure continued quality of service provision.

While the Omnibus Survey conducted in May 2003 will be repeated in 2004, further research will also be commissioned. This additional work will focus on those groups identified as being less likely to have convenient access to

computing and Internet technology and / or to be less inclined to make use of the technology. Furthermore, the research will be structured to provide information on how such groups can be facilitated and encouraged to participate in the Information Age.

As such, research will be both people and technology focused. 'People focused' to ensure that the obstacles to computing and Internet use are clearly identified and 'technology focused' to ensure that technologies which can assist individual groups within society are identified and utilised.

Although it is not possible at this stage to forecast accurately the outcome of the data collection exercises, allowance has been made for the likelihood that initiative and geographical gaps in access to computing and Internet technology will be identified. To help minimise such gaps the DIU will make provision for the funding of community and voluntary groups, either individually, in collaboration with other groups or in collaboration with the private sector to support innovative digital inclusion projects.

Groups will be invited to submit applications for funding of projects focused on providing access and / or training to those in society who are at greatest risk of digital exclusion. While research will identify indicative sections of society at risk, applicants will be encouraged to identify specific groupings within their catchment area that would benefit from digital inclusion projects.



The DIU will consider applications which:

- provide public access and / or training in computing and Internet technologies which meet a clearly articulated need; or
- provide private access and / or training for citizens who are unable to use public access points.

All applications will be scrutinised to ensure that proposed projects do not duplicate existing provision either within a geographical location or to specified target groups.

Funding, up to limitations that will be made explicit, will be made available for both resource and capital expenditure. Projects funded will be monitored to ensure they deliver against agreed objectives and provide services to an acceptable quality. This monitoring activity will include a mentoring role to maximise the chances of successful project outcomes.

Projects which are funded and which provide public access facilities will be required to register for inclusion in the knowledge base of computing and Internet facilities for Northern Ireland.

Through this funding scheme (if deemed appropriate by the Digital Inclusion Working Group) and the various other initiatives being conducted, the DIU aims to ensure that, in addition to meeting overall digital inclusion targets, public access points will be conveniently located² for 95% of citizens, irrespective of barriers to access.

² Conveniently located being defined as within a 20-minute journey by public transport.

7. The Strategy - Phase Three

Phase 3 of the strategy will primarily focus on review but will continue with the implementation of activities instigated in Phases 1 & 2.

The review, which will commence in April 2005, will determine if digital inclusion is progressing. It will focus on determining whether the 70% target (see page 6) is on track to be achieved by the December 2005 deadline and whether pockets of digital exclusion still exist.

Based on the outcome of this review and on the leadership from the Digital Inclusion Working Group, decisions will be taken at that time on whether to continue with the awareness, training and access activities instigated in Phases 1 and 2. The need for further policy initiatives will also be considered and, if appropriate, implemented.

This strategy will formally conclude on 31 December 2005. The DIU will then commission a review of both the extent of the digital divide at that time and the outcomes of the implementation of this strategy. This review will also measure the impact of greater access to and use of Internet and computing technologies on the citizens of Northern Ireland.



8. Annex

Glossary of Terms

CITU(NI) Central Information Technology Unit (Northern Ireland)

DIU Digital Inclusion Unit

ICT Information and Communications Technology

NISRA Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency

OFMDFM Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

Action Plan Timescales

ACTION	START
May 2003 to March 2004	
Establish DIU	05/03
Conduct Omnibus Survey 2003	05/03
Encourage private sector participation	06/03
Encourage public sector participation	06/03
Encourage community / voluntary sector participation	06/03
Compile central register	06/03
Compile database of access / training points	06/03
Provide access / training Information	08/03
Establish working group	10/03
Develop awareness campaign	10/03
April 2004 to March 2005	
Quality assure access / training providers	04/04
Commission citizen focused research	04/04
Commission technology focused research	04/04
Conduct omnibus survey 2004	05/04
Implement project funding	05/04
April 2005 to December 2005	
Instigate strategy review	04/05
Implement project funding (continued from 2004/05)	04/04
Conduct Omnibus Survey 2005	05/05
Commission project review	12/05
Conclusion of project	12/05