Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions eEurope 2005 Action Plan: An Update

(2005/C 71/14)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

Having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on *eEurope 2005 Action Plan: An update* (COM(2004)380 final),

Having regard to the decision of the European Commission of 17 May 2004 to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community,

Having regard to the decision of its Bureau of 20 April 2004 to instruct its Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an Opinion on this subject,

Having regard to its Opinion on *eEurope 2005: An information society for all* (CdR 136/2002 fin) (¹),

Having regard to its Opinion on the *Role of eGovernment for Europe's future*,

Having regard to its Draft Opinion CdR 193/2004 rev. 2 adopted on 22 September 2004 by its Commission for Culture and Education, (Rapporteur: **Mr Risto Ervelä**, Chairman of Sauvo Local Council, Chairman of the Regional Council of Southwest Finland (FI/ELDR),

Whereas:

1) information and communication technologies (ICT) play an important role in implementing the economic, social and sustainable development goals of the Lisbon Strategy,

2) the most important goal must be considered to be the creation of a socially and regionally equitable European information society,

Adopted the following opinion at its 57th plenary session, held on 17-18 November 2004 (meeting of 18 November).

1. **The Committee of the Regions' views**

A socially and regionally equitable information society

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1.1   **shares** the concern, reiterated in the mid-term review of the *e*Europe Action plan, about the effects of problems caused by the digital divide and **thanks** the Commission for making e-inclusion and social cohesion, as regards regional imbalances and the potential for delivery of e-services to widen accessibility for all, a new in priority in the Action Plan update, which is the subject of the present opinion;

1.2   **feels** that regional differences in the availability and pricing of broadband services have become a major obstacle to equal access to and participation in the information society and **considers** it important that the work of the Digital Divide Forum set up to address this problem get under way as soon as possible;

1.3   **notes** that the Commission's proposed actions to speed up e-inclusion are appropriate as such, but **has doubts** about their effectiveness in the short run and **thinks** that, in order to avoid digital exclusion, it must be ensured, at least for time being, that citizens also have the possibility to receive essential services via traditional channels.

ICT and the Lisbon Strategy

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1.4   **agrees** with the Commission that ICT has made it possible to raise productivity and increase the opportunities for inclusion, but **stresses** that, for example in public administration, only a small part of the potential has been exploited in this regard not only in terms of the provision of e-services in specific fields, but also investment, in compliance with the Community legal framework for competition, in those areas where demand may not be sufficient to attract commercial investors;

(¹) OJ C 128, 29.5.2003, p.14

1.5   **finds** that the measures presented in the original Action Plan and its update put the emphasis on developing on-line services although using ICT to make government more efficient and effective also requires changes in the way organisations work and cooperate with each other;

1.6   **supports** the Commission's view that, after 2005, the EU's information society policy be aligned more closely to the needs of the different areas of the Lisbon Strategy so that, in addition to the economic and social objectives, it give greater attention than at present to the relation between ICT and sustainable development.

Impact of enlargement

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1.7   **appreciates** the fact that the Commission has responded quickly to the needs created by enlargement by updating the *e*Europe Action Plan;

1.8   **points out** that, as a result of enlargement, the differences between Member States and, in particular, between regions have increased, as measured in terms of benchmarking indicators, and welcomes the steps the Commission proposes to take to improve the provision of information on benchmarking results;

1.9   **hopes** that it will be possible to make use of the good networks of local and regional authorities, which also cover the new Member States, particularly in the transfer of good experience.

Role of local and regional authorities in implementing the Action Plan

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1.10   **emphasises** the important and often independent role of Europe's local and regional authorities in the provision of on-line services in the areas of administration, health, culture, tourism and education and training and the part they play in local and regional projects for the development of communications services and e-business;

1.11   **thinks** that, without the extensive involvement of Europe's local and regional authorities, it will not be possible to implement open-coordination processes to promote voluntary and multilateral commitments to the priorities for the deployment of on-line services.

2. **The Committee of the Regions recommendations**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

2.1   **hopes** that the Commission clarify its information society policy by publishing a synthesis of the original *e*Europe Action and Plan and its update;

2.2   **thinks** that the monitoring of broadband availability should be improved so as to take better account of differences in user needs, as broadband services with the lowest capacity cannot contribute towards achieving the Action Plan targets for public on-line services, especially in the most remote regions;

2.3   **feels** that the availability of communications services that are important for society cannot depend solely on whether the private sector is interested in developing them in a particular area or not; rather, the public sector must be able, where necessary, to take steps of its own to ensure that the availability of communications services meets users' needs;

2.4   **hopes** that, particularly in the dissemination of good practice, prominence be given not only to on-line services but also to examples of how ICT has helped to improve quality and productivity in traditional services and reduce unnecessary red tape;

2.5   **supports** the idea of enhancing the pan-European dimension in public on-line services but **stresses** that the provision of day-to-day services required by companies and individuals in another Member State is also largely the responsibility of local and regional authorities, and it is hard to imagine that an effective pan-European dimension could be developed in this regard without the close involvement of the local and regional sector;

2.6   **proposes** that a more detailed report be drawn up on the reasons why the demand for public on-line services in Europe falls short of supply;

2.7 **emphasises** that all the parties responsible for the development of on-line health services should be afforded the opportunity to participate in drawing up national and regional roadmaps for e-health;

2.8 **expresses** the hope that interoperability in the area of e-learning, as called for in the Action Plan, can be increased by, for example, establishing European e-learning quality criteria for different types of education and training;

2.9 **considers it important** that the Commission carry out, as quickly as possible, an analysis of the market for and interoperability of electronic signatures which also takes into account applications other than qualified certificates and that, in so doing, it place special emphasis on pan-European services;

2.10 **requests** the Commission to take steps to ensure that the fact that technology makes it easier to use electronic signatures does not lead to a situation where, especially in the public sector, their use is demanded even though this is neither necessary nor appropriate from the point of view of the quality or security of the service;

2.11 **points out** that, in addition to e-signature procedures intended for service users, it is at least as important to develop the use of e-signature enabling a citizen to be absolutely sure that a message he/she receives from a public authority or a company comes from the source it is purported to come from;

2.12 **endorses** the Commission's blueprint for mobile payments and **stresses** that, because of Europe's advanced mobile market, mobile payments could help to spearhead the achievement of the Lisbon Strategy goals over the next few years;

2.13 **notes** that the Commission's contribution to developing a framework for digital rights management and inviting stakeholders to joint discussions is necessary and that digital rights owners will be encouraged to agree on the degree of interoperability;

2.14 warmly **welcomes** the Commission's plan to establish a database of SME best practices with regard to e-business and **hopes** that Europe's local and regional authorities, which work in close cooperation with SMEs, will also be able to play a full part in the development and use of the database;

2.15 **requests** the Commission to widen the scope of the guidelines on multi-platform approaches to include traditional service channels, in addition to on-line services, so as to alleviate the problems caused by the digital divide;

2.16 **thinks** that the benchmarking data provided by the proposed eEurope information service should make it possible to compare the performance of not only Member States but also regions since the differences between the latter are large and information on a region's shortcomings would enable the region's decision-makers to focus on redressing them.

Brussels, 18 November 2004

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Peter STRAUB