

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — eEurope 2002: Accessibility of Public Web Sites and their Content'**

(2002/C 278/07)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions — eEurope 2002: Accessibility of Public Web Sites and their Content (COM(2001) 529 final);

having regard to the Commission's decision of 25 September 2001 to consult the Committee of the Regions in accordance with the provisions of the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

having regard to the decision of its Bureau on 6 February 2002 to ask the Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an opinion on the matter;

having regard to the opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Fifth Report on the implementation of the Telecommunications Regulatory Package; the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Towards a new framework for electronic communications infrastructure and associated services — the 1999 Communications Review (COM(1999) 537 final) (COM(1999) 539 final) (CdR 520/1999 fin) <sup>(1)</sup>;

having regard to the opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on universal service and users' rights relating to electronic communications networks and services (COM(2000) 392 final — COD (2000/0183) (CdR 274/2000 fin) <sup>(2)</sup>;

having regard to the draft opinion adopted by the Commission for Culture and Education on 22 March 2002 (CdR 397/2001 rev. 2) (rapporteur: Mr Ervelä, Chairman of Sauvo Local Council, Chairman of the Regional Council of Southwest Finland, FIN/ELDR),

at its 44th plenary session of 15 and 16 May 2002 (meeting of 15 May) adopted the following opinion unanimously.

The Committee of the Regions

1.1. considers the matter addressed in the Commission communication to be crucially important for realising the social objectives of the European information society mentioned in the eEurope initiative and in other contexts;

1.2. endorses the main conclusions and recommendations presented in the communication for rapid development of Web accessibility in the public sector;

1.3. notes that many municipal and regional services already exist specifically for people with disabilities and older people, and considers it to be very useful that the Commission has supported the guidelines developed by the World Wide Web Consortium to ensure that the needs of particular user

groups can be relatively easily taken into account in the development of the growing number of public services provided through the Internet;

1.4. considers the recommendation that public web sites should be brought into line with the guidelines to be too general, since some municipal and regional online services are already designed exclusively for disabled or elderly people and some for very small and specific groups of users, whose accessibility does not necessarily have to be taken into account in the same way;

1.5. wishes to point out that users of municipal and regional online services are now quite a heterogeneous group in Europe. In addition to disabled and elderly people, the accessibility of various ethnic, language and religious groups must also be taken into account when developing services. The guidelines presented in the Communication partly serve to develop accessibility for these groups, but the Committee of

<sup>(1)</sup> OJ C 226, 8.8.2000, p. 56.

<sup>(2)</sup> OJ C 144, 16.5.2001, p. 60.

the Regions hopes that in future the Commission can extend the development of guidelines to take the particular needs of the above-mentioned user groups into account;

1.6. draws the Commission's attention to the fact that use of applications based on Internet browsers is now also increasing very rapidly within organisations, which means that the guidelines described in the Communication could also have a considerable impact on the provision of equal opportunities in the workplace;

1.7. suggests that enhancing public Web accessibility particularly in municipal and local government should be made a priority objective of pilot studies at European level also, since this level of public administration produces the largest proportion of services targeted at disabled and older people;

1.8. suggests that developing certain local and regional — both public and private sector — portals could be an instrument of good practice with respect to improving Web accessibility in the private sector;

1.9. emphasises that public sector services must be considered as an integrated whole determined by citizens' needs, and the part of these services provided through the Internet should not be treated separately. It is particularly important that services provided to disabled and older people through traditional channels can be developed alongside online services, that this group is no longer seen in a way that serves to exclude it and that the rights of people with disabilities are taken into account;

1.10. recommends that European local and regional authorities should as soon as possible apply the guidelines for developing online services set out in the communication and make whatever efforts are necessary to remove barriers to accessing them so that the new technologies do not create further difficulties for disabled people;

1.11. notes that there should be sufficient investment in promoting guidelines with businesses that are specifically developing and providing services, since understanding of the often straightforward accessibility options is in many cases deficient.

Brussels, 15 May 2002.

*The President  
of the Committee of the Regions*  
Albert BORE

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