

EDUC-023

Brussels, 22 July 2004

OPINION

of the

Committee of the Regions

of 16 June 2004

on the

**Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament,
the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions
on the Role of eGovernment for Europe's future**

COM(2003) 567 final

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 *The Role of eGovernment for Europe's Future* (COM(2003) 567 final),

Having regard to the decision of the European Commission of 26 September 2003 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 President of 6 November 2003 to instruct its Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an opinion on this subject,

Having regard to the Ministerial Declaration from the Conference on eGovernment of 8 July 2003 in Como, Italy,

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

Having regard to its Opinion on *Interoperable Delivery of pan-European eGovernment Services to Public Administrations, Business and Citizens (IDABC)* (CdR 247/2003 fin)²,

Having regard to its Opinion on *eEurope 2002: creating a EU framework for the exploitation of public sector information* (CdR 134/2002 fin)³,

Having regard to its draft Opinion (CdR 392/2003 rev. 2) adopted on 5 April 2004 by its Commission for Culture and Education (Rapporteur: **Mr Keith Brown**, Member of Clackmannanshire Council, Scotland, UK/EA),

Whereas:

- 1) eGovernment not only contributes to the efficiency of the public administration but to democracy in improving governance and citizens' participation in public life,

¹ OJ C 128, 29.5.2003, p. 14

² OJ C 73, 23.3.2004, p. 72

³ OJ C 73, 26.3.2003, p. 38

- 2) there is a need for top-political commitment to put in place eGovernment structures and services and that most legal barriers are not at European level but at national, regional and local one,
- 3) the different traditions and legal basis in the current and future Member States which makes it difficult to define common standards on the delivery of public services,

unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 55th plenary session, held on 16-17 June 2004 (meeting of 16 June)

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

The Committee of the Regions

- 1.1 **welcomes** the importance which the Commission is attributing to the role of eGovernment for the achievement of the Lisbon goals, and **places particular emphasis** on the role and contribution of regional and local government in promoting and exploiting its potential, due to the range and importance of the services and regulation they provide for both citizens and businesses;
- 1.2 **highlights** the essential characteristics of local and regional government, in respect of scale and closeness to communities which enables speed of innovation, knowledge and understanding of the needs of services and users which are paramount, and direct engagement at individual and community level which enables them to promote the acquisition of new skills and to influence behavioural changes required to make eGovernment a practical, beneficial reality;
- 1.3 **endorses** the description of eGovernment as essentially the combination of use of ICT in the area of government and administration, with organisational change, and the development of new skills;
- 1.4 **highlights** the paramount importance of creating and investing in training and development opportunities to enable the widest possible spectrum of individuals to participate in eGovernment developments;
- 1.5 **emphasises** that the value of eGovernment will be demonstrated in the transformation of public service delivery, and the enhancement of citizen involvement in democratic processes and public policy development, in other words the comprehensive modernisation of government service delivery and interaction with citizens;
- 1.6 **cautions** that such transformation at all levels of government is not cheap, but will require significant and sustained commitment of resources, redoubled by the need to maintain

existing systems through periods of transition, which is a distinctive requirement upon government not present in commercial environments;

- 1.7 **notes** that to enable a high level of adoption and interactivity, transition to broadband is essential, so **welcomes** the Commission's call for connection of all public administrations by 2005, and **believes** that funding support is required to resource such transformation, particularly for those areas where current level and rate of development of access is relatively low;
- 1.8 **appreciates** the distinction made in the Communication between eGovernance and eGovernment, and considers that the wider concept of the former encompassing major social services is highly relevant to the interests of local and regional government;
- 1.9 **commends** the application of a common framework of research standards to ensure that qualitative and quantitative assessment of all significant programmes and projects is published thus sharing both success to be emulated and frank analysis of failures to improve learning and future practice;
- 1.10 **believes** that partnership-working, the creation of consortia and joint venture developments at all levels among public agencies, and where feasible private organisations, both national and EU wide, is fundamental to exploiting innovation and avoiding obsolescence, to transferring existing and future good practice, and to achieving best value from public expenditure;
- 1.11 **recognises** the potential of eGovernment to sustain and promote cultural distinctions and equity of access to services and its contribution to policy and process among the diverse populations of the Regions, and in this respect, recognises the unique roles played by local and regional authorities, all of which makes quality research work important in informing inclusive practices;
- 1.12 **is aware** of the importance of privacy and security enhancing technologies to give confidence among service users, but **considers** that this must balance against adopting protocols which could unreasonably inhibit electronic transfer of information concerning identified individuals;
- 1.13 **observes** that this Communication is part of a wider suite of modernisation innovations, the collective impact of which has the capacity to transform citizen/government interaction for the better in respect of social inclusion, but nevertheless **considers** that there are potential dangers for social cohesion from isolation resulting from reducing interpersonal human interaction which must be guarded against.

2. The Committee of the Regions' recommendations

The Committee of the Regions

- 2.1 **recommends** that the European Commission in promoting eGovernment, gives priority to ensuring common standards, frameworks for information exchange and effective interoperability, to promote awareness of pan-European services, and ease of access to information on national and regional services for all citizens across the EU. Priority must also be given to security of all transactions and data. Public confidence and usage are directly correlated with security issues;
- 2.1 a) **recommends** that the European Commission redouble its efforts for real and effective coordination of action under eGovernment-related programmes, especially IDA, eTEN and eGov research activities under the Sixth Framework Programme, in order to optimise the results and make best use of the efforts and resources that the European Union is putting into developing eGovernment;
- 2.1 b) **recommends** that the European Commission examines in detail the regional and local dimension of actions under eGovernment-related programmes;
- 2.2 **recommends** funding provision from governments and from EU Structural Fund allocations for the provision of broadband technology in areas where it may not be commercially viable, thus ensuring the availability of eGovernment in all areas of the European Union focussing on those areas where access and/or rate of development of access is low. The specific features of the regions, especially their size and population, must be taken into account when determining the infrastructure funding needed to ensure access throughout the EU;
- 2.3 **insists** that at least in the transitional stage, training courses should be provided regarding access to eGovernment, with facilities for those with disabilities, older people and those who are less highly trained, in order to encourage *e-inclusion* and eliminate any danger of discrimination;
- 2.4 **welcomes** the observation that provision is no guarantee of usage of online services and strongly **encourages** research on demand-side preferences and barriers, both in relation to service type and access methods, as well as on supply-side innovation, to identify channels which will attract the widest spectrum of users, across differing geographic locations and among different age, gender and socio-economic groups;
- 2.5 **stresses** that the potential of IT should be exploited to the full when improving the quality and productivity of public services provided through traditional channels;

- 2.6 **recommends** the adoption of a protocol that eGovernment programmes and projects supported with public funding are required to share outcomes, and to report the benefits accrued from the initiative and lessons for improvement;
- 2.7 **urges** the Commission to encourage support for local and regional authorities to provide eGovernment in different languages with a special focus on regional and lesser used languages;
- 2.8 **acknowledges** the complexity of evaluation of major initiatives in new fields of activity, but **urges** the setting of clear targets at inception and full open critical assessment of outcomes (both successes and failures) on criteria including relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and functionality, with the goal of future improvement.

Brussels, 16 June 2004.

The President
of the
Committee of the Regions

The Secretary-General
of the
Committee of the Regions

Peter Straub

Gerhard Stahl
