Requirements & demands of citizens for services in Citizen First Regions

Current access and the services used

From analysis of the questionnaire returns, the most pervasive potential e-access channel across the partner regions is the mobile 'phone. Its use is consistently in the region of 80-90%; a possible link to the citizen that is commonly neglected at present. Results from Cambridgeshire and Mid-West Ireland suggest that around 10% have internet access via their mobile phone, and this will clearly grow. However, it should be noted that those with such access are also likely to have easy access to other channels such as the internet or digital television.

On the subject of television, although its use is commonplace (90%+), interactive services are not used by the majority (e.g. ~20%, Cambridgeshire). Significantly, there is currently only limited content available by this means. Although digital television does overlap with the take-up of internet access, it is not quite the same as the case of mobile internet access. In the case of digital television, there is an inexorable move towards a switchover from analogue services to digital, with the notable outcome of 100% digital services in the relatively near future. This change means that a vast majority of the population of each partner region will have access to digital television; a great advantage in terms of the reach on information and services when compared with minority channels.

With regard to internet access, there is significant availability at work, with 50-70% seemingly typical. Access at home varies from 35-60%, though this looks to be increasing still.

With regard to the activities accessed online:

- searching for information and the use of email are the most pervasive internet activities, likely to be used by 60%+ of the population.
- shopping for goods & services is also undertaken by up to half, with online banking another significant and growing focus (e.g. in Eindhoven)
- public services and information resources are less well used, with about one in five likely to engage online

Demand for access and e-services, next 2 years

The questionnaire responses also examined the likely demand for the near future. Mobile phone demand for the next two years looks to remain strong, especially with growth in the demand for internet access and 3rd Generation services. Similarly, television sees demand for increased use of digital services (by 15-20%) and interactive services, though this depends on rollout (e.g. Ieper awaiting rollout for availability).

The demand for PC and internet use suggests likely increases, especially for broadband services. In terms of activities exploiting this access:

- searching for information and email use will remain the major focus
- internet banking is likely to increase
- public services have potential to increase given the improved infrastructure and content, but there is great need to encourage understanding and demand from citizens

Barriers to access, knowledge, confidence and skills

The results of questions exploring the interplay between barriers to access and the enthusiasm, knowledge and skills needed show how interest and awareness are so important. Partners recognize a particular need for the promotion of the possibilities, especially to minority groups; something especially pertinent in the context of ageing populations. As research by MORI discussed in section 3 backs up, it is largely the older section of society that do not see the relevance of e-access and e-government in particular, and so have the potential to be marginalised as result. The incentive need not be directly about local government, but rather access to other content that makes the most of ICT provision supported by local authorities. An example in Cambridgeshire is the growing popularity of 'Commanet', a community archiving project (http://www.commanet.org/English/ Tutorials/WhatIsComma.htm). This is a prime example of engaging content that makes good use of ICT but is actually more about energising the local population, especially in this case those of retirement age.

Issues of cost and ease of access are therefore of vital importance as a prerequisite for the exploitation of content and the potential of social networks to support that use. The focus in CitizenFirst on community access & Public Internet Access Points (PIAPs) is thus welcome. However, appreciation is needed of both the physical infrastructure (including technological implementation and physical access and ergonomics issues, particularly with regard to disabled users for instance) and the social networks that make best use of this infrastructure.

Overall, there is wide support for internet websites/portals, one-stop-shops, and PIAPs, but there is more contention over iDTV, mobile 'phones, and call centres. Whatever the technological approach, the way in which engagement with citizens is expected and planned for is crucial. It is important to note that demand for access at home and also at libraries is strong, but much more problematic when it comes to other possibilities – even though they may represent key access for remote groups.

Finally, training was identified as a key priority across all partners as it is important to make the most of e-access once other barriers have already been overcome. This very much underlines the need to address citizens' circumstances and attitudes to ICT before giving appropriate and measured support.