



South-East Regional Authority

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February, 2006

Submission to
Forfás

Benchmarking Ireland's Broadband Performance



The South-East Regional Authority (SERA) welcomes this opportunity to submit its views on Ireland's Broadband Performance.

The South-East Regional Authority

The South-East Regional Authority is one of eight regional authorities established in Ireland in 1994, under the provisions of the Local Government Act 1991, (Regional Authorities) (Establishment) Order, 1993. The Authority comprises 36 elected members nominated by the six constituent local authorities in the region. Regional Authorities have been given a general competence to do all thing necessary for the effective performance of their functions, including wide consultation with local, regional and other public authorities, participating in or promoting research, requesting information and attendance at meetings of representatives from any local or public authority. The principal functions include: promotion of co-ordination in the provision of public services in the region; promotion of co-operation, joint action etc. between local authorities, public authorities and/or others; reviewing the overall development needs and investment priorities of the region and reviewing Development Plans of local authorities in the region.

South-East Region

The South-East Region covers the counties of Carlow, Kilkenny, Waterford, Wexford and South Tipperary. The area of the region is 9,406 sq. kms., (which is about 13.5% of the area of the state) and the population is 423,616. The region is predominantly rural in character with the main urban centres being Waterford City, Kilkenny City and the towns of Carlow, Clonmel and Wexford. The region has a balanced urban structure with the main urban centre in each of its five counties having a population exceeding 17,000. In addition, it has a range of smaller towns and villages evenly distributed across the region as well as a strong rural settlement pattern.

Broadband in the South-East Region

In the future, business and residential users will expect to receive and will depend on broadband services not just for high-tech applications but for nearly all areas of business and social endeavour. The issue is how to ensure that these services are delivered efficiently and cost effectively and how to avoid the serious risk of business relocating to Dublin and other urban centres offering more competitive broadband services. The cost of the backhaul connection between regional centres and Dublin is of concern. The cost of the service is high by international standards, and is a disadvantage to towns and cities in the regions. There are a number of heavy telecom users in the South-East, where international connectivity is crucial to their operations.

The backbone network in the South-East region is well developed, comprehensive and provides adequate capacity for current requirement and for any likely demand over the coming

years. However, the lack of competition in backbone capacity is a major concern, highlighted by the difficulty in obtaining access to fibre networks by competing telecommunications companies. This lack of competition has an obvious impact on the cost to domestic and corporate users of access to the network.

SERA and Broadband

‘SERPANT’ Project

The ‘SERPANT’ project, carried out under the government’s Regional Broadband Programme – Phase I, entailed the construction of Metropolitan Area Networks (MAN) in the six principal cities/towns in the region – Waterford, Kilkenny, Carlow, Clonmel, Wexford and Dungarvan. This involved the laying of almost 100 kms. of duct, sub-duct and optic-fibre and the provision of co-location facilities in these centres. E-Net is the Management Services Entity (MSE) with a brief to manage and market the MANs.

Regional Broadband Programme – Phase II

The Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources has published a list of some 90 towns with a population greater than 1,500 that will be included in the Regional Broadband Programme – Phase II. Nine of these are in the South-East:

- Cahir, Tipperary, Cashel and Carrick-on-Suir – South Tipperary
- Tramore and Dunmore East – Waterford
- Tullow and Muine Bheag (Bagenalstown) – Carlow
- Thomastown – Kilkenny.

Proposals and applications for funding have been submitted by the Regional Authority to the DCMNR for all nine towns and these have been approved. The public procurement process for appointment of Design and Supervision Consultants has been commenced and it is expected that approval to issue the Invitation to Tender will be forthcoming shortly. There are ongoing discussions with the DCMNR and its advisors in relation to the most suitable network design and related issues in the case of each of these towns. Following completion of the detailed design, the tender process for the construction can proceed. The Regional Authority is continually pressing the DCMNR and its advisors to move the project forward.

County and Group Broadband Scheme

The County and Group Broadband Scheme (CGBS) was launched in 2004 to provide broadband to communities with a population up to 1,500, mainly in rural areas or in underserved areas of larger urban areas. Communities are required to come together with a Service Provider who may avail of grant assistance of up to 30% to provide a broadband service to that community. The Regional Authority has appointed a Regional Broadband Coordinator who works on promoting the scheme and works with service providers and local communities to assist them with preparation and submission of project applications.

Under the First Call 34 projects (38 communities) were approved for funding. Castlecomer in the South-East Region was included. Under the Second Call 119 projects (445 communities) have so far been approved. Ten projects incorporating 93 communities in the South-East have been approved by the DCMNR for funding. Good progress is being made by the approved projects in the region in

advancing the provision of the broadband service to the communities. The Minister has announced his intention to issue a Third Call under the CGBS and this is expected shortly.

‘SEISS’ Regional Information Society Strategy

The Authority developed an Integrated Regional Information Society Strategy and Action Plan in 2001. Its purpose is to ensure that the South-East Region does not slip behind in the rapid global development of the information society and that the region at every level is fully geared up to maximise the benefits and opportunities that these developments offer to those that are prepared. The publication of the Strategy and Action plan was the first step on the road to the South-East becoming a successful and dynamic region in the global information society.

The ‘SEISS’ vision is for the South-East to become *“a more dynamic, innovative knowledge-based society where the opportunities offered by Information and Communications Technologies are embraced enthusiastically to help make the region a ideal place to live, learn and prosper”*.

The report can be viewed at www.seiss.ie .

Most effective way to accelerate the rollout of broadband services to all:

- Increased awareness is one of the key mechanisms. More intensive and focused Marketing campaigns by government, local and regional authorities and service providers are required.
- The practical benefits of broadband must be emphasised in these campaigns. They could be geared for particular target groups; eg. children, the elderly etc.
- Increased usage of ICT in schools. ICT must be incorporated into teacher training programmes and existing teachers need ongoing training in this area.
- The development of public points of access is a good short term solution for ICT usage.
- Regional Road Shows and mobile demonstration facilities to demonstrate the usefulness of ICT – these could be organised by the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources and the Regional Broadband Coordinators appointed for the rollout of the County and Group Broadband Scheme. The coordinators are ideally positioned to network with community groups.

How can Ireland accelerate the effective implementation of local loop unbundling to provide competition in the DSL market?

- The Government must legislate to enable COMREG to force Eircom to unbundle the local loop.
- Competition between technology platforms is essential to drive market growth.

- Some broadband services and bundled services are difficult for potential buyers to compare. A simple comparison mechanism should be devised.
- Cutting the retail price of broadband to consumers should be an objective to be pursued.

How can Ireland optimise infrastructure in state ownership to increase availability and choice of broadband services?

- The digital divide caused by differences in the availability, quality and cost of broadband services must be addressed to ensure balanced regional development and effective broadband rollout to smaller towns and rural areas.
- Government intervention in the provision of core infrastructure is crucial if the principles of the National Spatial Strategy are to be adhered to.
- The introduction of ‘last mile’ solutions at reasonable prices to consumers, particularly in areas with dispersed populations, is needed.
- Ensure that all urban centres are covered by the state broadband programme. The omission of Enniscorthy, New Ross and Gorey in County Wexford are cases in point. These are significant towns in their own right which are not included in the Government Phase II Programme.

How can Ireland best use experiences/initiatives in leading countries to create awareness and drive demand?

- Need to look at other countries with high rural populations in the context of broadband provision and take up.
- Continue to benchmark against other countries.
- Promote linkages between schools in different countries to promote communication using ICT.

Are there local initiatives that have been successful in some regions in Ireland that can be used as a template for other parts of the country?

The following projects are examples of initiatives undertaken by SERA to stimulate broadband uptake in the region.

INTERREG IIIB Project ‘e-bygov’

The South-East Regional Authority and the 6 City and County Councils in the South-East Region have developed an Online Payments and Receipts Initiative as part of the SERA’s participation in the Interreg IIIB Atlantic Area co-funded project “e-bygov”.

SERA managed and coordinated the project which involved the development of a website portal that would allow customers to pay online for selected services. The website portal is

generic in nature but also adaptable to local circumstances. Services available for payment on line include:

- Traffic Fines
- Water Charges
- Refuse Charges
- Housing Rents
- Housing Loans

An example of the new system can be viewed at:

<http://www.carlow.ie/ePayments/SERA1.htm>.

INTERREG IIB 'SENSITIC' Project

The 'SENSITIC' project was an EU funded initiative to benchmark the usage and to promote awareness of Information Technology and Communications in the South-East Region. The project gauged the impact of the Information Society in seven regions of Europe, including South-East Ireland. Progress achieved by the Information Society in the areas of – citizenship, enterprise, governance, education, tourism and culture – was measured. The project ran from July 2003 to December 2004. The survey revealed that the South-East had a high level of computer usage in business but one of the lowest levels of access to broadband.

Report can be viewed at www.sensitic.org/iso_album/snesitic2004.uk.pdf.

'Connected Communities' Project

The project involved the development of a dynamic and all inclusive pilot ICT development and demonstration site in a selected community in each county in the South-East Region which can be used to demonstrate best practices and provide templates and models that can be transferred to other community sites within each county in the Region.

The "Connected Community" project involved the facilitation of communities in the South-East Region, in the creation of relevant local community-based web content and mobile services.

An example of the sites can be viewed at <http://www.claneire.com/connected/dfba.htm> .

'CARP – Connection and Access for Rural People'

A related project, known as 'CARP -Connection and Access for Rural People' is an Interreg IIIA-funded project which deals with the provision of broadband access for the pilot communities in Ireland and Wales. The Welsh partners have developed local community broadband access for a range of communities in the Gwynedd area and this expertise will be transferred to the communities in the South East of Ireland.

A More Strategic Approach - Implementation

The government, through the DCMNR as the lead Department for driving and coordinating ICT and broadband development in Ireland, should adopt a more inclusive and strategic approach. In particular, it should utilise the potential and resources that exist in regional and local authorities and in other appropriate agencies at sub-national level to implement a well-defined strategy for promoting and delivering ICT and broadband initiatives at regional and local level. Good examples of what can be successfully achieved are to be found in the role that the regional and local authorities play in the implementation of the Regional Broadband (MANs) Programme and in the promotion and implementation of the County and Group Broadband Scheme (CGBS). In these instances, the South-East Regional Authority managed the construction of the MANs in 6 cities/towns on behalf of, and in partnership with, 11 local authorities in its region; each of the Regional Authorities appointed a Regional Broadband Coordinator to work with local communities and service providers to assist them avail of the CGBS to provide a broadband service to the smaller towns and rural areas. The impact of the latter initiative can be gauged from the number of applications received by the DCMNR under the First Call (when Regional Broadband Coordinators were not in place) as against the number received under the Second Call – 1st Call: 34 projects (38 communities); 2nd Call: 119 projects (445 communities).

Regional and local authorities should be tasked and adequately resourced to play a more proactive role in promoting and delivering broadband and ICT in their areas. In particular, each region should be required to develop and implement a Regional ICT Strategy, similar to the ‘SEISS’ in the South-East Region (for details see www.sera.ie)

The successful implementation of the Strategy will depend on support from a number of different agencies and to achieve that support will require the development of close working relations between these agencies. Appropriate structures to co-ordinate implementation and to facilitate ongoing monitoring and evaluation will need to be put in place. This will involve considerable horizontal and vertical integration.

At regional level, an integrated, co-ordinated approach should operate within defined territorial boundaries. It is strongly recommended that the Regional Authority structure be utilised for this purpose. ICT and broadband development is a key requirement for the achievement of balanced regional development for which Regional Authorities are tasked to implement at the regional level.