

DG INFSO Public Hearing, Brussels, 23/9/2009

Post-i2010

Section 3: High Speed Networks, Open Internet

Statement by George Hall, Patron, eris@

Eris@ (European Regional Information Society Association) is a not-for-profit network for the development and exchange of good practice in Information Society policies at the regional level of government – including Broadband.

Eris@ also manages the European Broadband Portal on behalf of DG INFSO. This portal is specifically focussed on Broadband and NGN issues.

Eris@ believes that the market will deliver “high speed networks” to most of the population eventually – but we know that the market will not deliver these networks to all of the population in the foreseeable future, particularly in remote or sparsely populated area.

With the imminent roll-out of NGN, today’s “digital divide” will get wider as the market prioritises on the “low hanging fruit” – the large cities and conurbations – that will enable the market players to minimise their risks and maximise their returns. We recognise that this makes sense commercially but it will make it much harder for public authorities in the less attractive geographies to modernise their public services, to improve service delivery and make them more inclusive. Modern public services for all depend on access to ubiquitous and affordable high speed networks for all – not just for the city dwellers.

Also, the competitiveness of the business sector in underserved regions will become progressively eroded-with grave impacts on the economic and social sustainability of those regions as businesses and jobs move to the more attractive locations that enjoy a 21st century high speed communications infrastructure.

Therefore eris@ believes that the public authorities in the less-served geographies should develop strategies to ensure that they do not get

stranded and left behind as the market focuses on the cities and conurbations.

We have produced a “To do list” – with colleagues in other networks present here today- that gives practical advice on how to do this. You will find this document on the European Broadband Portal (www.broadbandeurope.eu). Let me be clear – it is not a template. Each and every region has specific issues that need to be addressed. And we are very technology neutral –indeed, “technology agnostic” might be an apt description. We are not wedded to fibre, we encourage public authorities to explore all of the appropriate technologies – mobile (LTE when it is ready), cable, satellite, fixed broadband etc.

But we strongly advocate the use of mapping, to establish what infrastructures are present in any given geography. Not just mainstream telecoms – we encourage public authorities to look at other utilities e.g. power, water, transportation etc which all maintain telecoms networks, often with very high bandwidths. The mapping exercise also helps to identify prospective partners – organisations that could bring technology and also business skills to the table. We recognise that if public authorities decide to develop their own high speed networks there is a risk of creating a “patchwork quilt” of networks – but we consider that this is a more acceptable risk than having no access at all.

State Aid rules remain an issue – especially if incumbents have stated that they plan to invest within a foreseeable timescale (3 years in the current DG COMP guidelines) and we strongly recommend that public sector actors and consortia seek pre-clearance at the earliest opportunity.

Finally, we have 2 requests for the Commission colleagues today:

- We are still waiting for a clear Broadband Strategy from the Commission. This would be useful to enable Member States, Regions and Cities to align their policies. When are we likely to see it?
- Assuming that we end up with a “patchwork quilt” of high speed networks, is the Commission giving thought to the need for interoperability standards to ensure that services and applications

will be able to operate seamlessly and efficiently across this patchwork?

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