

Webcast

10:55 Plenary 2: eAccessibility – Removing Barriers to the Information Society

Minister Margaret Hodge, Minister of State for Industry & the Regions, Department for Trade & Industry, United Kingdom, addressed eInclusion and cultural diversity. Ms. Hodge noted that the eInclusion agenda is about achieving a range of public policy objectives in areas of: wider access to services; enabling wider economic activity; and, celebrating cultural diversity and the promotion of national identity within the EU Information Society. She communicated three key messages to delegates. First, do not ignore those who cannot access ICTs, or that some 80 million EU citizens are disabled, and 50% of these are unemployed. Second, focus on developing technologies that deliver what citizens really need, by focusing on user needs before technology design. Third, develop solutions based on partnership approaches.

She noted commercial sector approaches that identify real commercial and societal benefits when inclusion is maximised. Tesco plc invested 50,000 euros in creating an accessible Website, and this unlocked 1.9 million new potential customers by making information about Tesco's services readily accessible to them. The UK government has welcomed the eInclusion Charter launched by the Citizens Online initiative, as well as the Guide to Good Practice for designing Websites produced by the Disability Rights Commission.

Minister Jure Zupan, Government of the Republic of Slovenia, Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology addressed eInclusion and cultural diversity. Mr Zupan stressed the opportunities for ICTs to promote the preservation of cultural heritage, and in maximising access to these resources for education and distance learning for the largest possible numbers of citizens. He noted that intellectual property and copyright issues needed to be addressed when widening access to resources, and activities such as the Digital Libraries Initiative, and the Creative Commons licensing approach, provided guidance about possible models to enable access to resources. He identified the role that Structural Funds, and Framework 7, can play in enabling eInclusion and cultural diversity.

Minister Susanna Huovinen, Ministry of Transport and Communications, Finland Increasing Access to Communications, addressed Opportunities for the Elderly. Ms Huovinen highlighted the human perspective that underpins eInclusion for the elderly. While the generic term categorises the 'elderly', this is a very large and

heterogeneous group that needs highly diverse access to systems, training, and services, and where ICTs can play significant roles. Finland is placing significant emphasis on the creation of trust among elderly people so that they feel enabled and willing to engage with ICTs. She also stressed that ageing is a major opportunity for the development of new networks and services. The Finnish Presidency will be organising an ENISA Conference in September, where eInclusion will feature as a major theme.

Matthew Kirk, Director External Relationships, Vodafone Group, provided an industry perspective

He stressed the underlying customer focus of the telcoms industry, and introduced two Vodafone policy documents. The first, which examined the impact of mobile telecoms in Africa, noted that mobile infrastructures were more cost-effective where landline systems were poor, and that simple communication facilities for farmers allowed them to contact markets about the potential for selling their products before undertaking lengthy journeys. The second, which looks at the potential of mobile telecoms in healthcare, noted that simple services, such as sending text message reminders about doctors and hospital appointments, could save the UK health service over 330 million euros a year.

The telecoms industry had inclusion issues firmly on their agendas, and the development of pre-pay mobile phones was one example where a pricing approach overcame an exclusion – those without credit ratings, or a bank account, were excluded from taking out a subscription to account phones. Research by Vodafone identified that exclusion to ICTs existed along an ‘accessibility continuum’ from ‘finds easy’, to ‘frustrated’, ‘has difficulty’, and finally ‘is excluded’. They estimate that 9% of EU phone users have remaining significant access problems, and that once business addresses their needs there will remain 4% of people for whom special equipment, and specific government interventions, will be required.

He gave three key messages in conclusion. First, encourage industry to set challenging eInclusion targets, and monitor performance. Second, do not define the targets too precisely, or specify how the targets should be met – let industry innovate. Third, focus government attention on the remaining 4% of citizens who need very special access facilities.